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**Women's work teaching and learning in the secretarial section of a college of further education.**

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WOMEN ' S   WORK  
TEACHING AND LEARNING  
IN THE  
SECRETARIAL SECTION  
OF A  
COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

by

EDITH BLACK

Submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the  
University of Bristol  
1992

## ABSTRACT

Female students are no longer denied access to educational institutions as they were in the past. The problem now is to explain why so many female students choose to follow courses that limit their occupational choices to feminised segments of the labour market. At the core of the thesis is an ethnographic study of full-time students on office skills courses in Riverbank College, a college of further education in the south-west of England. All students on office skills courses in this setting are female, as are their teachers. Some students are mature 'returners' and others are young women who have just left local comprehensive schools. Data were collected mainly through observation in a wide range of classrooms and through informal interviews with students and teachers. It cannot be denied that the sexual divisions of the labour market are being reproduced through the daily actions of these teachers and students. It would therefore have been easy to use correspondence theory to explain classroom behaviour. However, analysis of interview data made it abundantly clear that neither students nor teachers could be regarded as passive or acquiescent. Both groups were active, reflective agents. Classroom behaviour was based on their attempts to make sense of their world as they found it and to adjust their perceived needs to the structure of available opportunities. The findings indicate that any explanation how and why girls and women are educated as they are must begin with the empirical investigation of their experience at the micro-sociological level. It must also recognise that the responses of female students to their schooling are framed by the complex structures of capitalist patriarchy.

### Dedication

This is dedicated to the memory of  
my grandmother, Edith Wilkinson (1884-1923)  
and my mother, Olive May Black (1912-1990).



### Acknowledgements

My thanks go first to the staff and students in Riverbank College who agreed to give me their time in interviews and endured my presence in their classrooms. I am also grateful to the Principal of Riverbank College who so readily supported my research interests. Last, but very much by no means least, my thanks go to Professor Patricia Broadfoot, Bristol University, whose unenviable task it has been to encourage, support, sustain and guide me through an extremely lengthy learning process.

I certify that this work is my own  
except where otherwise indicated.

It has not previously been submitted  
for any university award.

The views expressed in the work are  
those of the author and not of the University.

Elbadu  
31 December 92

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## APPENDIX



# CHAPTER ONE

## THEMES AND ISSUES

Most societies have a division of labour based on sex. However, definitions of 'women's work' and 'men's work' can be seen to vary both between cultures and temporally within cultures. Feminists therefore argue that such definitions are not based on innate, biological differences between the two sexes but are socially constructed. One of the central problems for feminist research is therefore to explain why and how the sexual division of labour is both reproduced inter-generationally and maintained intra-generationally. A key site for the exploration of these processes is the formal education system. There now exists a large body of educational research which takes as its central problem the exploration of gender differentiation in students' experience of the process of formal education and the outcomes of that experience. The primary aim of this study is to make a contribution to this body of research.

#### GENDER AND EDUCATION

Girls and women are no longer formally denied access to educational institutions as they were in the past (Burstyn, 1980; Delamont and Duffin, 1978; Dyhouse, 1981). The problem now is to explain why female students so readily and in such large numbers follow curricular paths that ultimately confine them to feminised segments of the labour market. It is widely recognised that such occupational destinations are characterised by low pay, low status and lack of promotion prospects

(Beechey, 1986; Coyle and Skinner, 1988; Dex, 1897). As Deem puts this aspect of the contemporary problem:

Girls may have gained equal access with boys to primary and secondary schooling, and do enter further education in larger numbers than boys. But what they have gained access to is not always the same in educational content and occupational currency as that to which boys have access (Deem, 1978:82. Emphasis in the original).

The now familiar patterns of sex-stereotypical curricular choices made during the years of compulsory schooling have for many years received attention from educational researchers (Davies and Meighan, 1975; DES, 1975; Pratt, Bloomfield and Seale, 1984; Riddell, 1988; Whyld, 1983). The major concern at this level of analysis has been the absence of girls and women from high status curricular areas and courses. This concern is often reflected in the title of contemporary feminist analyses of the educational system and classroom processes: 'The Missing Half' (Kelly, 1981); 'Invisible Women' (Spender, 1982); 'Counting Girls Out' (Walkerdine, 1989). Much of the associated remedial activity in schools is directed towards balancing the unequal distribution of girls and boys in such curricular areas as science and technology. Perhaps the most well-documented example of this activity is the GIST (Girls Into Science and Technology) project (Kelly, 1985; Kelly, Whyte and Smail, 1984; Whyte, 1986).

This same concern is readily detected in research in the further education sector (Cockburn, 1987; FEU, 1985; Stoney, 1984). However, very large gaps still remain in our knowledge of the experience of



female students in the post-compulsory years of education. Such knowledge as we have consists mainly of statistical comparisons between total numbers of female student enrolments and those of male students in the further and higher education sectors. These aggregate statistics, by their very nature, cannot explain the uneven distribution of female students throughout the further and higher education sectors. Nor do they give sufficiently detailed information for any adequate assessment to be made of the occupational opportunities and economic returns that female students might expect from their participation in post-compulsory education.

In general, feminist research interest in education and the remedial activity associated with such interest has been concerned either with access to high status educational institutions or with access to the high status knowledge embodied in some curricular areas and courses. As a consequence there has been very little exploration of the day-to-day experience of the large numbers of female students who choose to remain in feminised curricular areas during the compulsory years of schooling and opt for feminised vocational courses after leaving school. This study aims at an appreciative understanding of why it is that female students make educational choices that can only qualify them for entry into feminised segments of the labour market. In the following sections of this chapter I first describe the evolution of the study. Then I briefly explore the themes and issues that grew from it.

## THE STUDY

The central section of the thesis consists of an ethnographic study of teaching and learning in the Secretarial Section of the Department of Business Studies in a college of further education in the south-west of England. To maintain anonymity the college has been given the pseudonym of Riverbank College. For the same reason the town in which the college is located has been called West Port. The courses at the core of the study are full-time office skills courses. All students enrolled on these courses are female, as are their teachers. The curriculum followed by students in this educational setting prepares them for employment in a feminised segment of the labour market as typists, audio-typists, shorthand-typists, receptionists or general office workers.

The research setting in the study was initially chosen because it seemed so vividly to represent an extreme end-point in the sequence of sex-stereotypical educational choices made and curricular paths followed by large numbers of girls during their years of compulsory schooling. In their review of the literature on schooling and sex-roles, Davies and Meighan describe this phenomenon as 'an ever decreasing set of possibilities' (Davies and Meighan, 1975:165).

## THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The identification of the research problem has its roots in a small project (Black, 1984) carried out as part of the course work requirements of a taught M.Ed. course. As part of this project statistical data were put together which enabled comparisons to be made



between male and female student enrolment patterns both in non-advanced further education (NAFE) nationally and in Riverbank College. The exercise was simple in research terms, but it made visible many questions that could be asked about the differences between male and female participation rates in NAFE. These enrolment patterns are discussed in Chapter Five, but one major feature of particular relevance to the study can be introduced here. In overall total enrolment figures, female students outnumber male students in NAFE. This is true of total student enrolment figures both nationally and at Riverbank College. Since it is the exclusion or absence of female students from curricular areas and courses that has usually caused concern, such a surprisingly high participation rate in post-compulsory education on the part of female students would not at first seem to represent an educational problem.

However, a closer analysis of enrolment figures both nationally and at Riverbank College reveals very deep and often exclusive gender divisions, particularly on vocational courses. One of the consequences of these divisions in Riverbank College is that whole sections of the college are either predominantly male or predominantly female both in full-time student and staff populations. As Byrne points out, although most colleges of further education exhibit what she describes as a strong 'male ethos' (Byrne, 1978:188), it is often possible to find course and curricular areas of college activity where female students outnumber male students. This is true of Riverbank College. For example, all students on full-time office skills courses in the the Department of



Business Studies are female. The same is also true of students on full-time nursery nurses' courses in the Department of Humanities where students follow a two year course which qualifies them to become nannies. Students in such all-female vocational enclaves have, by their choice of course, already limited their occupational destiny to feminised segments of the labour market.

The two broad questions providing the impulse for the study were 'Why do female students choose such courses?' and 'What is their experience of them?' Since so much research attention has been given to sex-stereotypical educational choices made during the compulsory years of schooling, I began the study with the intention of making its central focus the cultural world of young women who had just left school. These are students on the long-established full-time General Secretarial courses in Riverbank College sponsored by the Local Education Authority (LEA). Their experience as 16+ students on these courses is a voluntarily chosen post-school option, end-on to their experience of the compulsory years of schooling in local comprehensive schools. However, the research problem expanded in two unexpected directions, both of which extended the range and depth of the study.

Although I was aware of new developments in further education sponsored by the (as it was then) Manpower Services Commission (MSC) [1], both for unemployed school-leavers and mature students, I felt it would unnecessarily complicate the issue were students on these courses to be included in the study. The way in which these initial intentions

were confounded is explained in Chapter Three where methodological issues are discussed. It is sufficient to note here that the experience of mature students on office skills courses sponsored by the MSC eventually became an important element of the research. Their unanticipated presence in the student sample enabled me to consider why it is that mature students, most of whom already have experience of the conditions of the labour market, choose a re-training course that does not extend their occupational options beyond the boundaries of women's work. A comparison between the mature students and the 16+ students considerably broadened and enriched my understanding of student motivation and their responses to the office skills courses they were following.

Teachers on the office skills courses I observed also play a much more significant part in the analysis than was originally planned. From the outset I wanted to avoid the tendency that exists in the literature to create an artificial separation between student perspectives (Woods, 1980a and 1990a) and those of their teachers (Woods, 1980b and 1990b). Even where this separation is not so starkly obvious, many studies of classroom life tend to make the focal point of their attention either students or their teachers. What is lost in such studies is any sense of the essentially reciprocal nature of interaction between students and teachers in the classroom. Pollard argues that it is 'most unrealistic' to analyse teacher strategies and student strategies in isolation from each other since '...they are mutually interrelated' (Pollard, 1982:23). Even so, I was initially blind to the analytical implications residing



in the fact that in this setting all teachers of office skills subjects are female.

It cannot be denied that the sexual division of labour in the public sphere of paid employment is being reproduced in this educational setting. The research carried out for my earlier study (Black, 1984) provided ample statistical evidence to support this statement. However, the available statistical data on subject, course and occupational choices made by women on vocational courses in NAFE does not explain why it is that such choices are made. The aim of the research design was to penetrate aggregate statistical data and reach towards explanations based on the contextualised experience of individual actors.

#### THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The outline of the research design was based on classic British ethnographic studies in formal educational settings (Ball, 1981; Burgess, 1983; Lacey, 1970; Measor and Woods, 1984; Hargreaves, 1967; Pollard, 1985; Woods, 1979). I shared with these writers the anthropological impulse to participate in the day-to-day lives of students and teachers in order to arrive at an understanding of their cultural world. The central focus of the study was therefore on classroom life since this is the social arena in which teachers and students interact frequently, regularly and, for the most part, inescapably. As Burgess puts it '...the classroom is formally at the centre of the educational stage' (Burgess, 1986:178). Through the sharing of this classroom experience as an observer I hoped to arrive at

an understanding of behaviour which, at a superficial level, could be read as an uncritical acceptance of the sexual divisions of the labour market.

The two main methods of data collection were observation in a wide range of classrooms and informal, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers whose classroom life had been observed. Methodological issues are fully explored in Chapter Three, but I will give a broad outline of the methods of data collection here in order to demonstrate the ways in which theoretical issues gradually emerged from the data.

### Classroom observation

In the first academic year of the study (1985/6) I spent a total of eight hours each week observing teachers and students going about their day-to-day work of teaching and learning such subjects as typing, audio-typing, shorthand and secretarial duties. It is difficult to present a verbal cameo which adequately encapsulates the quality of classroom life as I found it, but I recognised it immediately as being emphatically different from the conflict-laden descriptions of classroom life in secondary schools which dominate the literature from Waller (1932) to Willis (1977) and Woods (1979).

In the subsequent years of classroom observation (1986/7, 1987/8, 1988/9) I found nothing to disconfirm the findings of the first year. In a total of just over 500 hours of classroom observation with different



cohorts of full-time students, different teachers and a variety of office skills subjects the general picture was one of teachers and students working together harmoniously. Teachers concentrated classroom activity on preparing students for examinations that would give them appropriate qualifications for entry into a gender-specific sector of the labour market. The sexual divisions of the labour market and the inequalities associated with these divisions were neither questioned nor challenged in any way. For their part, students rarely behaved in a way that could be described as presenting any overt challenge to the ways in which their teachers managed classroom procedures and activities [2].

### Interviews

Both the available statistical data and data collected by observation in classrooms could have been used to support the thesis that the sexual divisions of the labour market are unproblematically reproduced in this educational setting. It would have been easy to leave the study at this level of analysis and to apply a deterministic, 'over-socialised' model of human behaviour to explain my observations in the classroom. The next stage of the study was designed to penetrate beneath the surface of this observed activity. Periods of observation were supplemented by a series of interviews with the teachers and students whose classroom life had been observed.

During periods of classroom observation I was struck by the frequency with which teachers made reference to their earlier experience as office workers. This past experience was clearly an important element

of their present practice as teachers. I therefore decided to build up a work history profile for each of the teachers in the study.

These interview data are analysed in detail in later chapters but I introduce here the main issues that arose from interview data that were gathered in an attempt to reconstruct the past.

### Becoming a teacher

Teachers on vocational courses in colleges of further education, whether male or female, are expected to have had experience of the kind of work in commerce or industry for which they prepare their students (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; Gleeson, 1981). There is therefore nothing remarkable in itself in the fact that all the teachers in the Secretarial Section have had prior experience of office work. What makes their career pattern different from that of their male counterparts is the way in which these female teachers have adapted their participation in the labour market so as to fit round what they felt was their primary commitment to domestic and child-care responsibilities.

The general pattern followed by the teachers in the study is that a first phase of paid employment as office workers began immediately on leaving school and usually ended just before the birth of their first child. At a later stage, as their children grew older, a second phase of paid employment began. There are considerable individual variations in the kind and amount of work undertaken during this second phase but the common factor is that they all felt they had a primary commitment to



child-care. Whatever paid employment was undertaken after the birth of their children had to be compatible with what they regarded as adequate child-care provision.

The majority began their second phase of paid employment by teaching office skill subjects on a part-time basis, usually to evening classes. Those who took this route back into the labour market comment on the fact that the flexibility of part-time teaching made it relatively easy for them to combine paid employment with child-care responsibilities. This second phase was characterised by a gradual increase in their teaching load as child-care responsibilities decreased. It culminated in their becoming established as full-time teachers. At various stages during this phase they began to feel concern about their lack of qualified teacher status and gradually worked towards the acquisition of the necessary qualifications, usually by the part-time route.

Two main issues arise from the analysis of these work history data. The first is that this path into qualified teacher status is largely unexamined, as is its effect on the people who follow it, their self-perceptions and their work in the classroom. As I have already indicated, teachers in the study use references to their first phase of employment as office workers as a part of their current pedagogical practice. However, these references are not used in any critical way. Office routines and practices are not questioned but constantly affirmed by teachers' references to them. This theme is explored more fully in

Chapter Eight where I analyse this apparently conservative classroom behaviour of the teachers in the study.

The second issue to emerge from these data has even wider implications; it takes the study to the level of social structures. The work history as told in the bare outline given above makes the second, transitional phase sound like a straightforward process. The more detailed analysis of the work history profiles provided in a later chapter demonstrates the calculative strategies employed by these women at various stages in the life cycle in order to achieve a compromise between competing demands on their labour power. These strategies cannot be understood without some recognition of the sexual division of labour, both in the domestic and the public sphere. The participation of the majority of women in the labour market is not as uni-dimensional as that of the majority of men. For most women, as for the teachers in the study, a balance has to be made between paid labour and unpaid labour in the home.

#### Becoming a student

Similarly, the past played an important part in shaping the perspectives of the mature students on office skills courses. For all the students in the study, enrolment on full-time office skills courses marked a decisive choice point in their lives. An obvious question to ask of them all was why had they chosen to enrol on this particular course. Answers to this question made me aware of the large differences in motivation that existed between the mature students and the 16+ students on General



Secretarial courses. These differences are analysed in detail in a later chapter when mature students are described as being at a revolutionary stage in their lives, whereas the younger students are described as being at an evolutionary stage.

Without exception mature students saw the course as a means of radically changing the direction of their lives. They regarded the course and the qualifications it offered as a means of effecting this change. Although their commitment to the course was high, it was not uncritical. Criticisms were not made manifest in overt classroom behaviour but were clearly articulated in interview.

In contrast to these mature students, the 16+ students were at a more tentative, evolutionary stage. Data gathered from application forms, interviews and questionnaires revealed how few of these students had embarked on the course with a positive orientation towards office work. They were very much feeling their way into the labour market. Many regard office work simply as a temporary phase. However, this more tentative commitment to the course and to office work did not result in conflict between students and teachers in the classroom. As with mature students, criticism only became apparent in interviews and in response to questionnaires.

One important issue that arises from the student interview data concerns the analysis of student behaviour in the classroom. Rather curiously, conformist students are absent from the majority of classroom

studies and, even when they are present, they are shadowy figures well out of the glare of the analytical arclights hanging over their disaffected peers (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Willis, 1977; Woods, 1979). More recent work (Brown, 1987; Fuller, 1983; McNeil, 1986; Turner, 1983) has demonstrated both the theoretical and political sterility of concentrating on deviant students and acts of so-called resistance. The findings here illustrate the point that conformity in the classroom should not be taken at face value. It is a mode of behaviour that should not be read simply as evidence of unreflexive passivity nor of an uncritical acceptance of everything from the curriculum to capitalism.

A second issue concerns both the research design and theory. The further I went into the study, the wider became its range of reference. In order to understand the observed classroom encounter between students and teachers the analysis had to move outside the classroom, first to the institutional level and secondly to wider social structures. Classrooms in colleges of further education are very different learning environments from classrooms in primary and secondary schools. Some account must therefore be given of the institutional framework within which the classrooms in the study are located. By this I mean the further education sector generally and, more specifically, Riverbank College. Additionally, since the provision of vocational courses in colleges of further education is so closely linked to the labour market, some account has to be given of its structures and conditions. One particular aspect of the labour market, the sexual division of labour,



is of particular relevance to this study and is explored in detail in a later chapter. The research design thus became a series of concentric circles extending outwards from the core of classroom observation. This design has obvious implications for the understanding and theoretical explanation of the behaviour observed in classrooms.

### THEORETICAL ISSUES

At the theoretical level the findings have a contribution to make to two major sociological problems. The first concerns the theoretical explanation of the relationship between the individual and society. In the search for explanations of human behaviour a much-deplored dichotomy has developed between what are described as macro-sociological and micro-sociological theories. Broadly speaking, the former grant a high level of causal status to 'structure' whereas the latter emphasise the importance of 'process' or 'action'. The second theoretical problem concerns the integration of feminist theory, which takes gender as a significant social variable, into so-called 'mainstream' social theory which does not do so.

### THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Macro-sociological theories tend to regard individual human behaviour as the outcome of the larger social framework in which the individual resides. The two branches of macro-sociological theory which have had most influence in educational research are structural-functionalism and neo-Marxism. Structural-functionalist theorists have a benign view of the the way in which individuals become integrated into the social

system into which they are born. Socialisation into adult roles is regarded as having an integrative function, enabling new members to find a place within society and thus ensuring its smooth running. Marxist theorists argue that the material base of a society will determine the superstructure. In a capitalist society, therefore, the superstructure reflects the inequalities of the relations of production. Marxists do not share the structural-functionalist view of society as a benevolent system but expose the ways in which its inequalities, based on class, are reproduced in each generation of new members.

Both structural-functionalist and neo-Marxist theories have contributed to our understanding of the system of formal education, the former being most influential during the 1950s and 1960s and the latter more recently. In the post-1944 reconstructionist period, when structural-functionalist theory dominated sociological thinking, the main educational problem to be explained was the persistent under-achievement of working class children. In a sense, Marxist theory provides a ready answer to that particular problem; in a capitalist society divided by class interests working class educational failure is inevitable. As Bowles and Gintis argue:

The educational system, basically, neither adds to nor subtracts from the degree of inequality and repression originating in the economic sphere (Bowles and Gintis, 1976:265).

It is clear that huge differences exist between the two theories in their conceptualisation of the moral framework of society. However,



what they have in common is a shared emphasis on the priority accorded to society and its structures over the actions of individual members of society.

Micro-sociological theory reverses this priority and focuses attention on individuals. Here social action is not regarded simply as an expression of the requirements or the imperatives of a social system. On the contrary, human beings are regarded as reflexive, active agents. The branch of micro-sociological theory which has had most influence within the sociology of education in Britain in the last two decades is symbolic interactionism. Researchers working within this theoretical framework aim to get behind overt actions and work towards an appreciative understanding of actors' motives for action and the ways in which they make sense of the world as they find it.

Interactionism has been much maligned for allegedly underestimating or even ignoring constraints external to the individual. If researchers employing the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism remain true to the theory, then there is no reason why they should not be able to attend to both creativity and constraint in human behaviour. The theory itself is not diminished in its explanatory force because some sociologists have concentrated on the creativity end

of the spectrum and been criticised (rightly) for doing so. Hewitt argues:

People are not absolutely free to do what they wish, nor are their acts fully determined by the social order that surrounds and constrains them. To see human behaviour as either totally free or completely determined....is to do serious violence to the reality of human conduct. Human beings construct their acts, but within limits that are imposed not only by the 'objective' conditions they confront but also their beliefs about those realities.....If we fail to understand this fact there is little worthwhile we can say about human conduct (Hewitt, 1984:223).

Throughout the study it is understood that structures in the sense of repeated and institutionalised patterns of behaviour exist and can be measured. Some of these patterns and quantifiable indices of behaviour will be referred to and used as a framework in which to locate the actions of the participants in the study. However, any notion of a separation between the individual and society is rejected. 'Society' does not have a reified life of its own any more than individuals can act as totally free and autonomous units within society.

A rather more intractable and under-developed theoretical problem concerns the incorporation of feminist theory into mainstream sociological theory which, on the whole, does not treat gender as a significant social variable.

## FEMINIST AND MAINSTREAM SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Sociological explanations of the gendered pattern of social life have been given deeper levels of adequacy by feminist analyses of the family,



education and the labour market but little progress has been made in achieving a synthesis of what is often described as 'mainstream' with feminist analysis. While it is clear that the outcomes of education in terms of qualifications and eventual employment patterns are different for males and females, much mainstream sociology of education continues to ignore gender as a significant social variable. The last decade has seen a remarkable increase in the number of empirical studies of girls' experience of schooling (Davies,1984; Deem,1980a; Delamont,1980; Griffin,1985; Stanworth,1983; Weiner,1985) but these findings have not been fully incorporated into mainstream sociology of education. In spite of trenchant feminist critiques of the inadequacies and conceptual gaps in mainstream analyses of schooling, no synthesis of the two views of this particular social arena has yet been achieved.

The situation within the sociology of education has improved to some extent in that all-male samples are not so frequently encountered which claim to be studies of the whole species, with the experience of male pupils universalised into the experience of 'kids' (Willis,1977) or the experience of male teachers universalised into the experience of genderless 'teachers' (Woods,1979). Studies of schools and schooling no longer exclude girls and women so blatantly as they used to do. The presence of females is now usually acknowledged; what has not yet happened is that their presence is given theoretical significance.



In discussing the difficulties of theorising about women's experience, Harding points out that, so far, most feminist theory looks like 'a rewriting of old tunes'. She argues:

....it has never been women's experiences that have provided the grounding for any of the theories from which we borrow. It is not women's experiences that have generated the problems these theories attempt to resolve, nor have women's experiences served as a test of the adequacy of these theories (Harding, 1986:646).

These comments would certainly hold true when applied to macro-level sociological theory. However, as I argue more fully in a later chapter, interpretive sociological theory is potentially capable of theorising women's experience since it begins at the level of action and meaning in specific contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The overt behaviour of students and teachers in this educational setting does nothing to challenge the sexual divisions of the labour market. The former group could therefore be described as conformist and the latter group as conservative. However, analysis of interview data demonstrates clearly that both groups are far from being passive. On the contrary, they are active, reflective agents who try to make sense of the world as they find it. Students can see that there exists a wide range of occupational opportunities as office workers in the local economy and so work hard to learn the skills which they consider necessary for such work. Although most are critical of some elements of their course, they are not critical of the general drive towards certification. Their teachers have had prior experience of the world of office work and are

not uncritical of its conditions. However, as teachers in a college of further education they come to share their students' instrumental approach to learning and stress the importance of examination qualifications. Thus students and teachers have a shared understanding of teaching and learning in this particular educational setting.

The study began at the level of the observation of classroom interaction between students and teachers. However, it developed beyond this starting point in directions suggested by the data. I argue that the classroom life observed here cannot be adequately understood without some appreciation of the wider institutional and social structures within which classroom life is embedded. While arguing this, it is not suggested that these wider structures necessarily determine micro-sociological activity at the level of classroom interaction. Institutional and wider social structures are simply regarded as frameworks within which activity takes place. Within these frameworks individuals make choices about courses of action to be pursued. In this sense they are free; they can make choices. On the other hand, it has to be recognised that individuals are not absolutely free; choices for action are not unlimited. To repeat Hewitt's argument:

Human beings construct their acts, but within limits that are imposed not only by the 'objective' conditions they confront but also their beliefs about those realities (Hewitt, 1984:223).

It follows from this argument that explanations of human behaviour must include not only accounts of social structures but also individual actor's perceptions of the choices available to them within those



structures. These accounts are to be found in the empirical core of the thesis.

Before proceeding to this empirical core I first review the literature on gender and education in Chapter Two. Then in Chapter Three I give an account of the research methods employed in the study and the theoretical framework which informs it.

In Chapter Four I explore the sexual division of labour in both the public sphere of paid employment and the private sphere of domestic labour. I use data drawn from informal interviews with teachers and use these to illustrate the various ways in which women balance waged labour with domestic labour at different stages in the life cycle. In Chapter Five I move nearer to the centre of the study and describe the further education sector. The main emphasis in this chapter is on the taken-for-granted nature of the close links that exist between the sexual divisions of labour market and the provision of vocational courses in further education colleges.

The core of the study is to be found in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. The aim of these three core chapters is first to describe classroom life in the Secretarial Section of the Department of Business Studies in Riverbank College and then to analyse the student and teacher behaviour observed there.



The thesis concludes with a chapter in which I summarise the findings contained in the study. I then draw out the implications of the findings for educational research and educational policy concerning the education and training of female students, particularly those on vocational courses in colleges of further education.

## FOOTNOTES

[1] Since the study began in 1985 the Manpower Services Commission has undergone many changes, one of which is its title. To avoid confusion, I retain the title by which it was known during the major period of the study.

[2] I observed only one student who could be said to be an exception to this. Her name was Jo. She was a student on the General Secretarial course in the academic year 1985/6. I describe Jo's classroom behaviour in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GENDER AND EDUCATION



Gender has not consistently been recognised as a significant variable in explanations of student responses to schooling. Acker (1983a) has demonstrated the deplorable neglect of the educational experience of girls and women in her review of two decades of research (1960-79) in the sociology of education. Much empirical work done by feminists has therefore been necessary simply to put girls and women (students and teachers) into the picture, to have their presence recognised in educational institutions.

The situation described by Acker (1983a) has changed in that there now exists a significant body of research literature on gender and education. However, whether or not this represents a qualitative improvement as opposed to a quantitative change is a debatable point. Most of the research on gender and education is done by women. Apart from the few pieces of this work which have achieved the status of what I would describe as 'standard references' in research done by men, most feminist empirical studies and theoretical analyses have not been incorporated within mainstream studies of the process of schooling. Both Acker (1984) and Arnot (1981) appeal for an integration of the sociology of women's education with mainstream sociology of education. Such an integration would considerably enrich our understanding of the field which, at the moment, looks like a 'his and hers' version of this particular aspect of social life.

As a framework for this study I have drawn on both feminist research and mainstream research. The latter body of work provides a rich fund of empirical studies which aim at a theoretical understanding of student behaviour in the classroom. Unfortunately, as I shall demonstrate, the most well known and influential of these texts do not include gender differentiation in their analysis. In spite of this deficiency, I argue that it is possible to pick up analytical tools from this body of research which can aid an understanding of the classroom life observed in this study. The review of the literature contained in this chapter is thus divided into two main sections. First I give an account of the relevant feminist research and theory. Secondly, I give a summary of mainstream educational research on student responses to schooling.

#### FEMINIST RESEARCH AND THEORY

There is much debate about definitions of feminist research and how, if at all, it can be distinguished from other research paradigms (Bowles and Duelli-Klein, 1980; Hammersley, 1992, Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1983). The debate is wide-ranging and is as yet unresolved. However, the major point of agreement in the debate which is of immediate relevance to this chapter and to the study as a whole is that feminist research treats gender as a significant variable in explanations of the social world. In this way feminist research is sharply distinguished from from large portions of mainstream sociological research.



Recent reviews of feminist research on gender and education can be found in Acker (1984), Arnot (1981), Davies (1984), Deem (1978), Delamont (1980), Middleton (1987) and Weiler (1988). There is now such a diversity of theoretical perspective to be found within this body of literature that most reviews of the field attempt to categorise the various approaches employed.

Acker (1984), for example, makes a broad distinction between 'fundamental' and 'implementary' approaches. Implementary approaches are described as having much in common with liberal or equal rights versions of feminism. In an earlier paper, Acker (1983) describes fundamental approaches as 'why' theories in that they seek a basic principle (or set of principles) to explain why it is that the different social positions of men and women exist. Implementary approaches, on the other hand, are described as 'how' theories in that they remain at the level of description and simply document the processes which act to perpetuate gender differentiation.

Arnot (1981) makes a similarly broad distinction between what she describes as the 'cultural' perspective and the 'political economy' perspective. She argues that most of the research within the cultural perspective has a limited agenda. Gender inequalities in education are here simply regarded as an educational problem; educational solutions to the problem are therefore thought to be possible. The research which she locates within the political economy perspective takes a broader view; gender inequalities in education are here regarded as part of a wider



problem of gender inequalities in a range of social contexts. Arnot argues that since gender inequality is not simply an educational problem, solutions cannot be found solely within educational contexts.

In the following section I refine these broad distinctions and describe three strands of feminist theory: liberal feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism. To date it is liberal and radical feminist theories that have had most influence on educational reform initiatives. Most of these initiatives would come within the 'implementary' or 'how' approach identified by Acker (1984) and the 'cultural' perspective identified by Arnot (1981) in that they tend to be based on remedial action within schools and classrooms. Here, gender inequalities in education tend to be regarded simply as an educational problem. Socialist feminist theory is as yet in its infancy, combining insights from Marxist analysis of capitalism and radical feminist analysis of patriarchy. Its impact on educational reform remains to be seen. It has already demonstrated (Arnot 1981; Deem 1978; Wolpe 1978) its potential for yielding a wide understanding of gender inequalities across a range of social contexts. This understanding demands that education is not regarded as an isolated sphere of activity, but is seen as part of a larger network of social contexts in which gender inequalities are pervasive. In this respect, socialist feminist theory falls within Acker's (1984) 'fundamental' or 'why' approach and Arnot's (1981) 'political economy' perspective.

There is some dispute about the usefulness of drawing such distinctions between the various strands within feminist theory. Delmar (1986), for example, castigates such 'naming of parts' as a 'sort of sclerosis' of the women's movement. My purpose in drawing these distinctions is to demonstrate that different theoretical explanations of gender inequality suggest different lines of remedial action. I would agree with Deem that '...uninformed action often produces undesirable and ill-conceived changes' (Deem, 1980b:182). Theoretical understanding of a problem must precede remedial action. The strengths and weaknesses of each strand of feminist theory identified here will be examined later in the chapter.

#### LIBERAL FEMINISM

Liberal feminism has the longest history of the three strands of feminist theory identified here. Its origins are to be found in 18th and 19th century philosophical and political theories concerning equal citizen rights and political freedom. Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) is generally regarded as the first great feminist statement in English. Liberal feminists in the 19th century, both in Britain and North America, did not challenge or seek to change the social formation as it stood but fought for equality of opportunity within it. The aim of contemporary liberal feminism remains reformist rather than revolutionary, with its focus for action concentrating on achieving a quantitative increase women's participation in the public sphere.



Liberal feminist research in education falls within the functionalist theoretical framework and the closely associated human capital arguments of mainstream sociology of education. There are clear parallels, particularly in Britain, with the work done in the 1950s and 1960s on class inequalities in education. First there is an emphasis on measuring the outcomes of education in terms of passes in public examinations, staying-on rates beyond the compulsory stage of education and the linking of these factors with career and employment prospects. In liberal feminist literature girls are said either to 'under-aspire' or 'under-achieve' by these measurements. As a consequence, it is argued that human talent is not being fully exploited. Concern is then expressed that the educational system is not only unfair to individual girls but inefficient in that the national need for trained labour power is not being fully realised. These twin accusatory themes of 'unfair' and 'inefficient' run through liberal feminist critiques of the educational system as strongly as they ran through earlier human capital arguments about class inequalities in educational outcomes.

This theoretical perspective and the logic of the arguments attached to it have been used in much of the official discourse on gender inequalities in education and employment. The work of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and recommendations of the Women's National Commission (WNC) fall within this rhetorical framework. The Manpower Services Commission (MSC) has also employed this rhetoric in its official statements and recommendations on equal opportunities for girls and women in its various training schemes from the Youth



Opportunities Programme (YOP) to its successor the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and then the more recent Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI).

As Arnot (1981) points out, educational research carried out within this framework employs the key concepts of socialisation into sex-roles and sex-role stereotyping, much of which relies heavily on work (mostly employing the research techniques and theoretical concerns of psychology) carried out in the United States. In this body of work the process of socialisation into sex-roles is said to operate from birth onwards through the family and the different levels of formal schooling. Additional reinforcement comes from peer-group pressures and the communications media. Young people of both sexes, it is argued, are socialised into adopting sex-specific modes of behaviour, self-expression and dress. More importantly, they are socialised into accepting limited concepts of what they might be and do as adults. These limits are framed by culturally and temporally determined sex-role stereotypes of acceptable norms of 'feminine' and 'masculine' behaviour.

Contemporary liberal feminist debate differs from mainstream functionalist argument in that it seeks to eradicate the influence of patterns of socialisation into sex-roles. Within functionalist argument socialisation into adult roles is regarded as a benign process, acting for the benefit both of the individual and of society as a whole. Liberal feminists, on the other hand, seek to 'break the mould' of sex-role stereotyping which they regard as imposing undesirable limits on

human aspirations and expectations. The liberal feminist argument has been used as the legitimating corner-stone of a wide range of reform initiatives in schools, some of which are directed at students and some at teachers. The aim of the first is to encourage girls and young women to study traditionally 'masculine' subjects and so provide them with the qualifications to enter traditionally 'masculine' areas of employment. The aim of the second is to expose discriminatory practices in the employment and promotion of teachers and to encourage women to apply for posts of responsibility in educational institutions. For example, a recent report on Equal Opportunities (Gender) in colleges of further education cited the following as 'areas of concern':

...sex differentiation in choice of subject, under-representation in key subjects such as science, engineering and technology, under-representation of women in senior academic posts...(FEU, 1989:1)

The strengths of the liberal feminist perspective in the field of education are regarded by its detractors as its weaknesses. Liberal feminist research has performed a valuable task in documenting and bringing to the forefront of public debate the unequal outcomes of educational experience and the consequent limitations on occupational choice and general life-chances for girls. Its detractors would say that this is mere description which does nothing to analyse, let alone eradicate, the causes of the patterns of inequality. The same is said of liberal feminist accounts of the absence of women from positions of power and authority in educational and other public institutions. Liberal feminist proposals for change in education have been found



acceptable by many official bodies and have formed the basis of reform initiatives taken by several LEAs and individual institutions. Its detractors would say that the liberal feminist perspective is found palatable because it contains no radical challenge to the social formation and no questioning of its values of individualism and competitiveness.

The general aim of liberal feminists in the field of education is directed towards redistribution rather than towards any radical change in the structures of society. Byrne (1978) argues the liberal feminist position fully and forcefully, but her analysis and recommendations for change amount to little more than a redistribution of financial and human resources within the framework of a social formation which is left intact. Remedial recommendations formulated within this theoretical framework are aimed at individuals who must change their attitudes and/or learn to aspire. The liberal feminist perspective is locked within the liberal political philosophy of individualism and its acceptance of a hierarchical and competitive society.

## RADICAL FEMINISM

Radical feminist theory is the most diffuse of the three strands of feminist theory identified here. Its origins are in the Women's Movement of the 1960s. It shares the substantive concern of interpretive sociology (particularly phenomenology) with the social construction of knowledge. Radical feminist researchers are suspicious of 'grand' theory and positivistic research methodology, preferring to employ the



methodology characteristic of interpretive sociology (Roberts, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1983).

Whereas liberal feminists speak of women as a 'disadvantaged' group, radical feminists speak of women as an 'oppressed' group. The liberal feminist viewpoint is that disadvantage, once identified, is open to amelioration through reform programmes. The oppression identified by radical feminists is perceived as being structural; women's liberation from their oppression would therefore require a social revolution. For radical feminists the cause of women's oppression lies in patriarchal relations. There is a continuing debate within feminist theory about an acceptably adequate definition of patriarchy (Barrett, 1980; Beechey, 1987; Walby, 1990 ). Radical feminists use the term patriarchy very broadly to refer to all systems of male dominance; patriarchy is everywhere. Daly describes patriarchy as 'the planetary Men's Association' (Daly, 1978:39).

Radical feminist work has made an immense contribution to the redescription and reanalysis of human experience, stemming from the exposure of sexist bias and assumptions at the heart of most of what passes for knowledge. As Middleton (1987) points out, there are strong parallels between radical feminist and mainstream phenomenological insights into the social construction of knowledge. In the field of education there have been explosive insights into sexism in school readers (Lobban, 1974), the content of school curricula (Whyld, 1983), academic disciplines (Spender, 1981) and language usage in general

(Spender, 1980). This work has carried such conviction with it that many educational institutions now routinely carry out screening tests on all written materials produced, from prospectuses to the work sheets in daily use in classrooms. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has produced pamphlets containing anti-sexist guidelines for use by teachers in schools and in colleges of further education. Several LEAs have also organised In-service Training programmes to support teachers in anti-sexist initiatives (Cant, 1985; Taylor, 1985).

Radical feminist theory has also influenced educational research which has exposed the subtle ways in which pedagogical practice and classroom interaction (teacher/student and student/student) serves to devalue and denigrate girls' achievements and aspirations (Spender and Sarah, 1980; Stanworth, 1983). Again, this work has carried sufficient conviction with it that it has been used as the basis of many official recommendations for remedial action in schools. Radical feminists (Spender, 1982) share the concern of liberal feminists that women are 'invisible' in positions of influence and authority in educational establishments. Much work has been done in educational institutions to eradicate sexism and sexist practices and help create an environment in which equality of opportunity might become a reality for girls and women. Feminists are now beginning to assess this work and attempt to measure its effectiveness (Weiner, 1985; Whyte et al, 1985).

There is some irony in the fact that so many radical feminist concerns in the field of education should have been taken up by official



bodies and regarded as being amenable to remedial reform both at the compulsory and post-compulsory stages of schooling. At its extreme theoretical point radical feminism argues that, since patriarchal power is so all-pervasive, the only solution short of over-throwing it is to withdraw from it and create alternative, women-centred groups. In the field of education at the compulsory stages of schooling this would logically lead to the establishment of single-sex schools. This idea has recently been debated by feminists (Arnot,1983; Deem,1984; Shaw,1980), but has received little support. It is interesting to note that beyond the compulsory stage of schooling there has been much discussion of and experimentation in the establishment of women-only courses (Bowles and Duelli Klein,1983; Hughes and Kennedy,1985).

The radical feminist perspective unites all women as a group and identifies the source of their oppression in patriarchal relations which, it is argued, permeate all areas of social life. Critics of this perspective argue that 'patriarchy' as a concept is used in such a universal, ahistorical fashion that it is purely descriptive. Critics also point out that radical feminist theory ignores important differences, such as those of class and colour, between women.

#### SOCIALIST FEMINISM

The most recent move in feminist theory has been towards an integration of some of the insights of radical feminist theory with Marxist theory. This body of work, usually described as socialist feminism, aims at an analysis of the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which



patriarchal relations and capitalist relations are inter-related (Eisenstein, 1979 and 1981; Sargent, 1981; Walby, 1986 and 1990). Socialist feminists argue that gender inequality is explained not by 'capitalism alone' or 'patriarchy alone' theory but by an analysis of the articulation between the two sets of relations, described in this body of work as capitalist patriarchy. Socialist feminist theory is still in an evolutionary stage, slowly progressing from an early reliance on classical Marxist analysis, focussed on class inequalities, towards a more refined analysis which is capable of taking into account inequalities based on gender and ethnicity.

In classical Marxist analysis the sex of the protagonists is irrelevant to the analysis; it is class, defined by the relation to the mode of production, which creates the great division in capitalist societies. The family is regarded as an undifferentiated economic unit defined solely by the male head of household's relation to the mode of production. Classical Marxist theory thus leaves many problems unresolved for feminists who wish to remain loyal to the basic analysis of class divisions.

One problem surrounds the conceptualisation of women's domestic labour. Since this form of labour is unproductive in the sense that it does not create surplus value from which profits are made, it remains outside classical Marxist analysis. What has become known as the 'domestic labour debate' has produced a rich but, as yet, unreconciled range of attempts to redefine women's domestic labour so as to bring it

within the general framework of classical Marxist theory (Barrett,1980; Vogel,1983). A further problem surrounds Marx's statements on the reserve army of labour. While Marx makes clear the usefulness to capital of such a body of workers who can be drawn into the labour force when required and then later ejected, his analysis does not make clear why it is that women form such a large proportion of this group.

Feminist debate around these weaknesses in classical Marxist theory has drawn attention to the need for a fuller analysis of labour which takes account not only of the social division of labour but also of the sexual division of labour. The question about whether or not women's oppression can adequately be explained within even a modified version of classical Marxist social theory remains unresolved.

One of the distinctive features of the analysis of capitalist patriarchy in socialist feminist theory is an insistence on the rejection of a priori assumptions from 'grand' theory and a dependence on the empirical investigation of specific situations. It is argued that the articulation between capitalist relations and patriarchal relations is not fixed but is modified over time and within different areas of paid employment. The relationship between the two sets of interests is not necessarily harmonious, neither is it necessarily conflictual (Walby,1990). In order to arrive at a theoretical analysis of this relationship, the experience of women in specific labour market locations at specific historical moments has to be subjected to empirical investigation.



### Socialist feminist theory and education

Much early socialist feminist educational research relied heavily on neo-Marxist analysis of education within a capitalist social formation. The work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and, to a lesser extent, Althusser (1971) have been particularly influential here. Although most mainstream neo-Marxist analysis either ignores the education of girls and women or treats it as a peripheral concern, feminist researchers in Britain have taken over and modified aspects of this theory, using it to explain the structural inequalities experienced by women in education, the labour market and the family (David, 1980; Deem, 1978; MacDonald, 1981). In North America and Australia mainstream neo-Marxist analysis has been readier to absorb a concern for inequalities based on race and sex into theories of class inequalities (Anyon, 1983; Apple, 1982; Connell, 1982; Gaskell, 1985; O'Donnell, 1984; Valli, 1986).

The strength of socialist feminist adaptations of neo-Marxist theory lies to a large extent in the original theory. Macro-sociological theory emphasises the point that schooling cannot be considered in isolation from its political and economic context. Arnot (1983), for example, argues that it is naive to believe that educational reform alone can change society. At the theoretical level, this kind of argument makes liberal feminist theory and school-based ameliorative reforms look inadequate to deal with the complexity of the problem to be solved. Persuading female students to choose 'masculine' curricular paths and courses, as is advocated by liberal feminists, is not enough. Wolpe argues:



...even assuming that it were possible for women to replicate the training, in every way, that men receive, it still would not follow that it would ensure them a place in the skilled world of work (Wolpe,1978:161).

She adds that, even given the same training and qualifications, women would still be in competition with men for a fixed number of skilled jobs, would still face the power of male-dominated trade unions and would still have to overcome the resistance of employers reluctant to employ women in non-traditional jobs. This argument throws into doubt remedial educational policies based on liberal feminist theory where educational qualifications in traditionally male curricular areas and courses are seen as the key to balancing gender inequalities in the labour market.

Some of the weaknesses in this body of work mirror weaknesses that are well-documented in the neo-Marxist theory from which it is derived. In particular, correspondence theory (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), has been extensively criticised on the grounds that it is over-deterministic. It could also be argued that, in general, neo-Marxist theory exists at too high a level of abstraction and that we lose sight of human agency in the midst of esoteric theoretical formulations, described by Rose (1986:172) as 'increasingly Talmudic exchanges'. As neo-Marxists themselves (Apple,1983) have come to realise, the determining power of the economic base, even if it is determining only 'in the last instance' (Althusser,1971), can inspire little more than political paralysis. The concept of 'resistance' has provided a route out of the political cul-de-sac of correspondence theory.

## Resistance

When used in educational research the concept of resistance has proved extremely effective in increasing our understanding of the cultural world of students and the complex nature of their response to the experience of schooling, particularly the experience of failure. However, in the hands of some researchers it has become a rather over-worked and frequently mis-used concept. Aronowitz and Giroux claim that the current use of the concept of resistance suggests:

.....a lack of intellectual rigor and an overdose of theoretical sloppiness (Aronowitz and Giroux,1985:104).

Too much oppositional behaviour has been interpreted by educational researchers as a politically potent and heroic response to the repressive and alienating conditions of schooling. All too frequently, the actor's meaning contained within acts of overt rejection and rebellion in the classroom has been extended far beyond its immediate context. At the level of both theory and practice too much has been claimed for acts of 'resistance' (Aronowitz and Giroux,1985; Hargreaves,1982; Walker,1985).

The work of Willis (1977) is an important exception in that it does much more than simply document acts of resistance in the classroom. He demonstrates that the resistance of the 'lads' and their counter-school culture have much in common with the oppositional strategies and shop-floor culture of their fathers. Both cultures celebrate the winning of space, time and some power of self-definition from the attempted impositions of those who officially control such matters in schools and



factories. However, Willis clearly demonstrates that these are short term cultural victories. Exploitative social and economic conditions exist well beyond the influence of the transitory and momentarily liberating delights of 'having a laff'. Willis acknowledges that the 'penetrations' are only 'partial'; the in-school behaviour of these working class boys condemns them to a life-time of unskilled manual labour. The cycle of social reproduction continues. Willis's (1977) analysis counteracts what he later (Willis,1981) describes as the 'creeping functionalism' in correspondence theory, but it by no means implies an uncritical celebration of acts of rebellion in the classroom.

Much of the literature employing the concept of 'resistance' concentrates on the experience of white, working class male students but it has also been co-opted by feminists to explain the response of female students to formal schooling (Anyon,1983; McRobbie,1978). McRobbie's work is almost a female mirror image of Willis's (1977) study of white, working class boys. She describes how working class girls create their own culture of sexually charged 'femaleness' in opposition to the school's attempt to define 'feminine' behaviour as docility, passivity and diligence. The girls in this study break rules by wearing make-up and disrupting classes by discussing boy friends in a loud voice. At the same time as this cultural display gives girls some power over their immediate conditions in school, McRobbie argues that it binds them to a future life framed by the social and economic constraints of the sexual division of labour within a capitalist patriarchy.



## Methodological implications

The positive and distinctive contribution that socialist feminist theory makes to an understanding of gender differentiation and associated inequalities rests largely on its insistence on the empirical investigation of the articulation between patriarchal relations and capitalist relations in specific contexts. Neither set of relations is accorded priority over the other. At particular historical moments and in particular contexts it may be that one set of relations acts harmoniously with the other. At other times and in other contexts it may be that they act in contradiction to each other. The interplay between the two is a subject for empirical investigation.

This insistence on empirical investigation has much in common with neo-Marxist educational research which has adopted ethnography as its characteristic methodology in exploring the cultural world of students (Everhart, 1983; Valli, 1986; Willis, 1977). The work of Willis (1977) is the most frequently used reference point in this body of research. Through his exploration of the cultural world of the 'lads', Willis demonstrated that although class relations of domination and exploitation are ultimately reproduced through the agency of the school, this process is not as simple and straightforward as suggested by correspondence theory. As Willis later states:

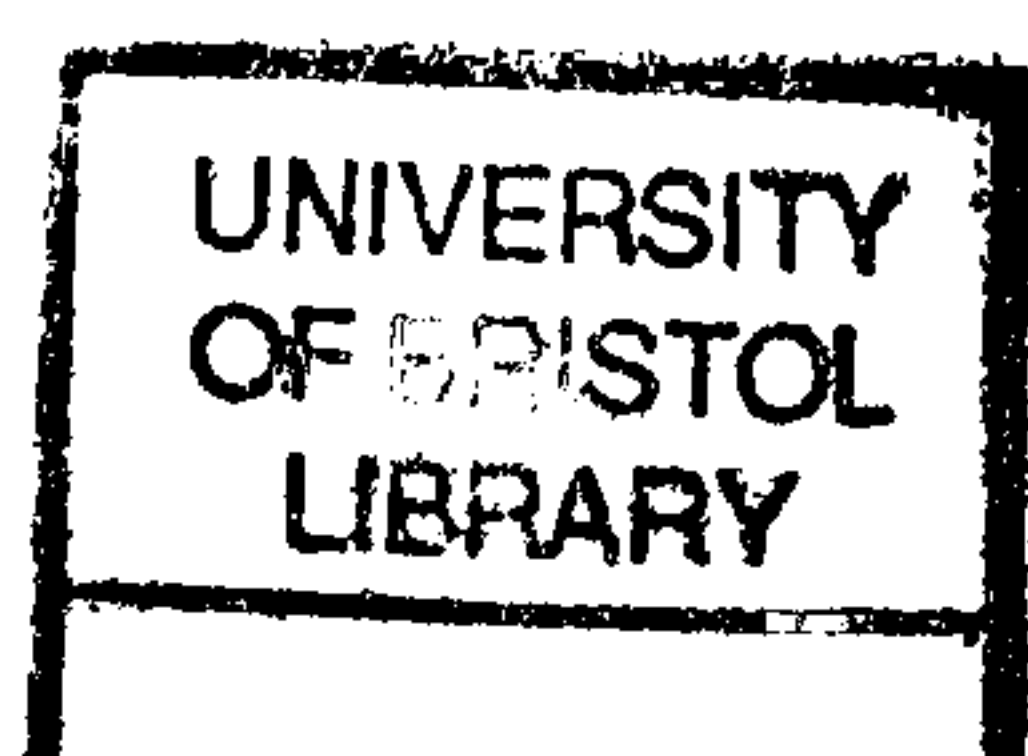
Correspondence omits consciousness and culture as constitutive moments of social process and treats human action as the consequence of quite inhuman and separate 'structures' (Willis, 1981:53).

It is work such as this that makes possible the sociological analysis of the point of balance between the individual and society and an exploration the boundaries of constraint on the freedom of individual action.

The whole corpus of ethnographic research which sets out to explore and explain the cultural world of students should, potentially, be capable of yielding a rich and balanced cartography of student experience throughout the educational system. This has not happened. Neo-Marxist ethnographers have been very selective in their choice of cultural worlds to be explored. The emphasis rests on the description of rebellion and rejection. As a result of this selectivity, the experience of the majority has been ignored. Brown (1987) argues that the emphasis in cultural studies on rebellious, working class males has deprived us of any understanding of what he describes as 'ordinary kids', that is the majority of working class boys and girls, and their responses to schooling. Brown (1987) argues that an analysis of what he describes as the 'compliance' of this invisible majority would provoke a deeper questioning of the purposes of schooling and the values of society which inform those purposes than the readily available analyses of the more visible and audible 'resistance' of a selected minority.

#### PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES IN FEMINIST THEORY

Feminist researchers in education have carried out a most important task in placing the experience of girls and women on the educational map and thereby rendering that experience amenable to analysis. Equally





importantly, this body of work has demonstrated some of the deficiencies of so-called mainstream social theory which is based on the experience of males only. However, problems do exist within feminist theory itself and have to be recognised. I have already indicated that there are divisions within feminist theory. While each division has yielded valuable insights into the experience of girls and women in education, each division is also so marred by some explanatory or political weakness. These are summarised below.

Liberal feminist theory forms the basis of much of the work done by the Equal Opportunities Commission and has found ready acceptance by government agencies and LEAs who wish to implement equal opportunities (gender) policies. However, detractors readily point out that liberal feminism is essentially conservative. As Banks (1981:243) states, liberal feminism leaves the traditional division of labour and the traditional role of women unchanged and unchallenged. While liberal feminism has done much to bring the experience of girls and women out of obscurity it nevertheless remains locked within what is essentially a conservative political agenda.

The central concern of liberal feminist theory in education is to enable girls and women to enter high status curricular areas and courses, usually in science and technology. Then, the argument goes, women will be able to enter high status occupations which at the moment are numerically dominated by men. Educational qualifications are thus seen as the key to change in the gender divisions of labour market.

Within this theoretical framework, little regard is given to the sexual division of labour in the domestic sphere. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, the teachers and the mature students in this study found that their participation in paid labour had to be balanced against the demands on their labour power in the home. Most of them chose occupations and conditions within those occupations which enabled them to strike the balance between paid and unpaid labour that best suited them. This balance did not remain static but changed over time, depending mostly on child-care responsibilities.

Radical feminist theory has also formed the basis of many reform initiatives and programmes in educational institutions. In general terms, perhaps the most profound contribution of radical feminist theory in education has been to expose the androcentric nature of what is regarded as 'knowledge'. In relativising existing knowledge, radical feminists have paved the way for reforms ranging from the revision of classroom readers and materials used in primary school classrooms to the introduction of Women's Studies courses at degree level in institutions of higher education. Although radical feminist theory has identified the source of women's oppression as patriarchy it has been accused of using the concept too loosely and ahistorically. If patriarchy is so all-pervasive and all-powerful as radical feminist theory proposes, then the only political solution to the problem is to withdraw from male dominated institutions and form women-only associations. It has also been pointed out that radical feminist theory ignores important differences, such as those of class and colour, between women.



Although socialist feminism is the youngest of the three strands of feminist theory identified here, it promises to yield most in analytical and political power. Socialist feminists argue that the source of women's oppression is not to be found in the power relations of capitalism alone nor in the power relations of patriarchy alone, but in the complex and sometimes contradictory articulation of the two sets of relations. Since this is so, the exact nature of the articulation cannot be asserted but demands empirical investigation. To date, socialist feminist theory has had most impact in analysing the workings of capitalist patriarchy in the substantive area of women's labour. A range of historical and contemporary empirical studies of women's paid and unpaid labour now forms the basis of a convincing body of theoretical work.

The way forward for a socialist feminist exploration of education would be to stay true to the insistence on empirical investigation at the micro-sociological level. In so doing, it will be the experience of girls and women in education that forms the basis of theorising about that experience and not any borrowing or adaptation of theoretical concepts based on the experience of boys and men. In addition, socialist feminist theory recognises that there are dual, competing demands on the labour power of women. The responses of female students to schooling are thus framed by the complex macro-sociological structures of patriarchal capitalism.

Some mainstream sociologists recognise this complexity but then retreat from confronting it. For example, Carter says:

The structural relation of school experience to subsequent labour market experience for women is very complex and does not exactly replicate the relation that obtains for men. For instance, many women achieve good grades, graduate from high school and still obtain only secondary jobs. To understand the relationship of women to existing job structures, we must consider not only the structure and ideology of schooling but also the structure and ideology of the family. To avoid confusing the analysis with too many details, we have ignored the circumstances peculiar to the experience of women (Carter, 1976:80).

The basic task of understanding gender and gender relations in the sphere of education is not simple. As Arnot argues:

....explaining how and why girls and women are educated as they are is not a simple task; it reveals the complexity of the educational system, the intricacies of its internal structures and processes and the importance of its relations with external structures such as those of the wage labour process and the family (Arnot, 1986:132).

Social theory which recognises, but then ignores, the complexity of women's experience simply because it confuses the model based solely on the experience of men is surely irredeemably flawed. Rather than ignoring 'circumstances peculiar to the experience of women', as Carter puts it, feminist researchers have taken that experience as the starting point of their research. Much mainstream sociological analysis has simply failed to grapple with the complexities outlined above by Arnot.

It can be seen from the outline of feminist research in education that feminist theory brings the experience of female students out of the shadows and into forefront of analysis. However, there exists a strong



tendency in feminist educational research to present female students as the passive victims of repressive policies and practices. In seeking a more refined analysis of student responses to schooling it is therefore necessary to turn to mainstream studies of classroom life. Although the major texts in this corpus of research do not treat gender as a significant variable in their explanations of classroom behaviour, they have never the less made available a range of analytical categories which can be used as tools to aid our understanding of the variety of student responses to schooling.

Much of the early literature which analysed the unequal outcomes of formal schooling concentrated on the measurable inputs to and outcomes of the educational system. The educative process itself, or what went on inside the so-called 'black box' of the school was largely taken for granted as a beneficial process. The problem that had to be explained was why so many working class children failed to take up the advantages that an assumed beneficent educational system had to offer them. More recent research has moved inside schools in order to share and analyse the day-to-day activities of students and their teachers. The social world of the classroom comes under scrutiny in this body of research.

What follows is a summary of the extensive literature on student adaptations and responses to schooling. The summary is organised in order to demonstrate the way in which models of classroom behaviour have been progressively refined so as to be capable of explaining an

increasingly wide range of student responses to schooling. I begin with sub-culture theory, then move to adaptations models of student behaviour and conclude with a brief account of interactionist studies of the social world of the classroom.

### SUB-CULTURE THEORY

Early accounts of the process of schooling (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970) used sub-culture theory to explain the patterns of student behaviour they discovered in the schools they studied (a boys' secondary modern school and a boys' grammar school respectively). Hargreaves found that two student sub-cultures formed over the years; one pro-school and the other anti-school. Boys in the lower streams progressively disassociated themselves from the official school values. Deprived of status in the school's value system, they rejected the student role and substituted it with 'an autonomous and independent peer culture'. Lacey used the same theory to explain a similar bi-polar patterning of student behaviour in the school of his study, as did Ball (1981) in a mixed comprehensive school.

Sub-culture theory has been widely used, both in schools and other contexts, to explain 'deviant' behaviour. The development of an anti-school sub-culture with its now familiar modes of behaviour 'mucking about', absenteeism, disobedience and disruption, can be seen within the explanatory framework of this theory as a rational response to failure and status-deprivation in school. The great advance made by such studies is that they made it impossible to regard deviance as an individual,



pathological state; attention was at last drawn to within-school processes as a possible explanation of inequalities in the measured outcomes of education.

One of the weaknesses of these studies is that they do not include the experience of girls. Lambart's (1976) study of the 'Sisterhood', a group of third year students in an unstreamed urban grammar school for girls, was part of the same research project that produced the studies of boys written by Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1970). Lambart's analysis of the 'Sisterhood' revealed a complexity not apparent in the simple bi-polar groupings found in the boys' schools in the studies carried out by Hargreaves and Lacey. The 'Sisters' in Lambart's study were from different class backgrounds, were in different forms and different ability sets but regarded themselves as 'a sort of family'. The Sisterhood as a group openly flouted school rules and one of its members, Janice Goodwin, was identified by teachers as a key trouble maker. Yet Lambart concludes '...despite its deviance, the Sisterhood existed as a focus for girls with more than average ability' (Lambart 1976:158). The evidence drawn from Lambart's study challenges the neat simplicity of the model based on the experience of male students. In spite of this, the model remained intact.

#### THE ADAPTATIONS MODEL

The adaptations model of student behaviour is capable of a much more sophisticated analysis than the simple bi-polar accounts of sub-cultural models. The origin of the model is in the work of Merton (1957) but it

has undergone considerable modification when applied to students in educational institutions, for example in the work of Wakeford (1969) and Woods (1979). Merton identifies five modes of adaptation to the social order based on a matrix of 'acceptance' or 'rejection' of recognised goals and means of achieving those goals. Harary (1966) added 'ambivalence' and 'indifference' as possible adaptations, thus refining Merton's simple duality of acceptance or rejection. In his study of a boys' public boarding school Wakeford (1969) applied and further extended the adaptations model. A significant advance in Wakeford's typology was the addition of a temporal dimension to the model. Woods (1979) also found that student adaptations were not fixed but were capable of modification over time.

The weakness in both the sub-culture theory and the adaptations model, nomatter how refined, is that they operate on the scale of huge generalisations about human behaviour and the motivational springs of that behaviour. Turner (1983) points out that the sub-cultural model treats all students as conformists, with even 'deviant' students conforming to 'deviant' sub-cultural values. What is absent from this model is any awareness of individuals as active agents; they simply follow rules. The origins of the adaptations model in structural-functionalism and the attendant weaknesses of that theoretical stance are obvious when applied to schools. For example, a large problem with the model is that it implies the existence of commonly held, institutional values and goals. Recent studies of the micro-politics of schools (Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1986) make it clear that schools are not



such single-minded institutions as the adaptations model of student behaviour requires us to believe.

A further problem of more immediate relevance to this study is that conformity tends to be regarded as being self-explanatory mode of behaviour, beyond need of analysis. In Merton's view conformity is the most common type of adaptation in a stable society. He did not develop his typology in order to explain conformity, but in order to explain behaviour patterns that diverge from the assumed norm of conformity. In Wakeford's analysis, conformity is defined as Merton defined it: conformist students were those who displayed a positive attachment both to the goals of the school and to institutionally approved means of attaining those goals. Unlike Merton, however, Wakeford found that only a minority of boys adopted the conformist mode of behaviour and these were mainly senior boys. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1961), Wakeford defines the boarding school in his study as a 'total institution' and compares the behaviour patterns of these conformist boys with those of 'suckers' in prisoner-of-war camps and 'square johns' in prisons.

As Woods (1984) points out, conformity does not necessarily imply the kind of hyper-conformity described by Wakeford and suggests that the typology could usefully be extended to include a more shades of conformity. Woods' own typology (1979), based on his work in a mixed secondary modern school, makes space for four different styles of conformity: compliance, ingratiation, ritualism and opportunism. Compliance has two variants, both of which are based on identification

with and acceptance of goals and means. Optimistic compliance describes unqualified acceptance whereas instrumental compliance implies acceptance for particular purposes. Ingratiators seek to maximise benefits by winning the favour of those who have power, even if the result is unpopularity with peers. Ritualism has the same meaning that it had in Merton's typology, but rather than identifying it as deviant behaviour as Merton did, Woods identifies it as conformist behaviour. Opportunism is a temporary, experimental phase which leads to other modes of adaptation. As Wakeford did, Woods identifies a temporal dimension in his typology, with student adaptations changing over time.

Having extended the range of student behaviour patterns to which the broad label 'conformist' might be applied, Woods (1979) then argues that it would perhaps be better to do without it altogether except as an umbrella term for a group of student styles. Hargreaves (1979) shows a similar lack of interest in the deeper analysis of conformist behaviour and dismisses conformist students in strong terms. He proposes a brief typology of four ideal types of student which he describes as the 'committed', the 'instrumentalists', the 'indifferent' and the 'opposition'. Of the 'committed' students he says: '...they are broadly conformist, though that is an unfortunate and unpleasant term'. He adds that:

....this type need not detain us long, for such pupils are readily recognised by teachers since they are but miniature versions of themselves (Hargreaves 1979:21).

This dismissive attitude towards conformist behaviour and conformist students on the part of some educational researchers bears a striking



similarity to the attitude of Willis's rebellious 'lads' to their conformist contemporaries, the 'ear'oles' (Willis, 1977).

#### GENDER, SUB-CULTURE THEORY AND THE ADAPTATIONS MODEL

Turner (1983) provides a detailed critique of the theoretical and methodological weaknesses of the research which employs sub-culture theory and the adaptations models to explain student behaviour in school. What is missing from Turner's critique, though, is a recognition of the fact that the majority of this research is either based on an all-male sample (Hargreaves, 1967, Lacey, 1970, Wakeford, 1969) or, even when based on a mixed-sex sample, fails to recognise the significance of gender as a variable in the explanation of student behaviour in school (Ball, 1981, Woods, 1979).

Much of this research is influenced by the long-standing concern within British sociology of education with class differences in educational achievement. The longevity of this concern and its insistence on building models of student behaviour based on the experience of male students, regardless of contradictory evidence based on the experience of girls, is well illustrated in Ball's (1981) study of a mixed comprehensive school. Ball explicitly takes up the question posed in earlier studies of schooling carried out by Lacey (1970) and Hargreaves (1967), that is:

....how one can study the social mechanisms operating within a school and apply such knowledge to explain the disappointing performance of working class pupils (Ball, 1981:xv).

Ball recognises, as Lacey did, that in using the bi-polar model of pro-school and anti-school orientation, he was making a generalisation that did not necessarily apply to all students. In order to illustrate this point, Ball gives the example of a group of girls who could not be neatly classified as pro-school or anti-school. These girls, he says:

....were not disruptive or difficult to control in lessons, but neither did they participate or work hard. They tended to sit quietly or talk among themselves, offering neither threat nor support to their teachers. They are, to an extent, anti-school in their attitudes but not in their behaviour (Ball 1981:68/69).

Ball had earlier described these girls as 'low-achievers' and 'not very hard-working', and then adds that they were almost 'invisible' during lessons, rarely speaking to their teachers or being spoken to by them. These girls do not fit the sub-culture model in which it is argued that low-achievers in the school's scale of values reject and invert those values and learn how to 'achieve' in the sub-cultural, alternative lifestyle of disruption and the subversion of teachers' aims. Yet Ball fails to explore this demonstrable anomaly in his model.

He also gives examples of two pairs of girls whose behaviour and attitudes to school work represent '.....a reversal of the typical social class and education relationship..' One pair are middle class girls who exhibit an ambivalence to schoolwork and so did not typically represent what Ball had earlier described as the 'educative drive' of the middle class student. The second untypical pair are working class girls who are quiet and hard-working and described as being 'under a great deal of pressure from their fathers to do well at school'.



No explanation is sought for the anomalies presented by the responses of these girls; they are simply dismissed as anomalies. The analytical power of the model based on the behaviour of male students remains unquestioned.

In spite of the deficiencies outlined above, there are some analytical tools that can be salvaged from the adaptations model of student behaviour in order to explain the classroom behaviour that I observed. First there is the temporal dimension to student behaviour patterns observed by both Wakeford (1969) and Woods (1979). Wakeford noted that it was mainly senior boys in the school he studied who adopted the conformist mode of behaviour. These were boys who were aiming at posts of responsibility and prestige within the school. Woods's model is even more sophisticated than that of Wakeford in that he demonstrates in much more detail how student responses might vary over time, with students moving back and forth between different modes of behaviour during their school career. The notion of change over time thus releases the adaptations model of student behaviour from the static model proposed by Merton. Secondly, Woods refines definitions of conformity to include different shades of conformity. This makes it possible to identify 'different degrees, as well as types, of response' within this broad category (Woods, 1984:24).

Taken together, these two notions have proved helpful as a starting point in the explanation of student behaviour in the classrooms observed in this study. Student responses were not static but varied

from subject to subject. Equally importantly, Woods's refining of the broad category of 'conformity' aided my analysis of the differences between the classroom behaviour of 16+ students and that of the mature students in the study. Neither age group could be said to be disruptive or rebellious; they could easily have been lumped together as conformist. However, an analysis of shades of difference between the two age groups, based on Woods's differentiation between categories of conformity, enabled important differences between the two age groups to be illuminated.

Woods's typology represents a significant advance in that it suggests that conformist students are not passive but active. His category of 'instrumental compliance' makes it clear that students who fall within this category have 'particular purposes' for their compliance. However, there is much in Woods's typology that is superficial in that it takes too much of student behaviour for granted. He begins to differentiate between student responses to the various subjects which make up their curriculum, but limits this differentiation to students who are following academic examination courses. There is a whole class of fourth year girls who are following a commercial course. These girls are described by Woods as '...the most contented of all from the point of view of subjects' (Woods, 1979:87). However, no attempt is made to distinguish between student responses to the different subjects which make up their curriculum; Woods simply assumes that students respond to the course as a whole. The findings in my study make it clear that student responses are not so monolithic as this.



In order to find an even finer analysis of student behaviour it is necessary to turn to studies of classrooms which are broadly categorised as classroom ethnographies. These studies are generally informed by interpretative, micro-sociological theory. Since the majority explicitly employ the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism they are often described as interactionist studies of classroom life (Delamont, 1983; Hammersley, 1980; Hammersley and Woods, 1984; Hargreaves and Woods, 1984; Stubbs and Delamont, 1976).

#### INTERACTIONIST ACCOUNTS

Furlong's (1976) work is frequently signposted as marking a considerable advance in the understanding of student behaviour in the classroom (Stubbs and Delamont, 1976; Hammersley and Turner, 1980). Furlong's study is a reflection of the general theoretical movement in sociology which enabled educational analysis to progress from somewhat static explanations of student behaviour towards a more sophisticated exploration of the delicate and shifting nuances of the social world of the classroom. Furlong rejected the bi-polar model proposed by Hargreaves and Lacey, finding the concept 'interaction set' a more useful and accurate means of analysing the contextual variability of student classroom behaviour. Specifically employing concepts derived from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism Furlong argues that, for the girls in his study, 'definition of the situation' is a constant problem that demands continual negotiation. He found that classroom situations change in the meaning they have for students and,

as these meanings changed, so did a student's assessment of how to behave.

However, as Hammersley and Turner (1980) argue, there are weaknesses in Furlong's work. The concept 'interaction set' is contextually based in the classroom but does not relate student behaviour to wider frameworks. For example, the internal structures of the school and the position of students within these structures are both left unexamined. Furthermore, even wider social structures play no part in Furlong's analysis despite the fact that the students in his study were female and the majority of them were , as he puts it, '...of West Indian origin'. Hammersley and Turner (1980) argue that Furlong's study '...points us in the right direction' but only '...takes us a few steps on the way'. They argue for an explanation of student activity which begins at the level of intentions and motives but also extends to the structural features of the school and the wider society.

This argument highlights the tension in interactionist studies of the classroom and in sociological theory generally. Furlong's (1976) study forced attention towards the shifting micro-sociological contexts of student behaviour. Later studies employing the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, particularly key interactionist concepts such as strategies and negotiation, further developed an understanding of the richness of the social world of the classroom. At the same time many of these studies are open to the criticism levelled against



Furlong's study in that the wider frameworks of this activity were not taken into account in the analysis.

More recent work has moved in the direction outlined by Hammersley and Turner (1980) in that attempts have been made to construct theoretical models which link micro-sociological interaction to macro-sociological structures. Two empirical studies which demonstrate the analytical potential of this move are Fuller's (1983) study of black girls in a mixed comprehensive school in London and Brown's (1987) study of male and female working class students in mixed comprehensive schools in South Wales.

#### FULLER'S 'BLACK GIRLS'

Fuller's work acts as a counterbalance to Furlong's study. The girls in Fuller's study had a sharp eye on life beyond the school gates. Their in-school strategies were firmly based on their knowledge of sexual and racial discrimination in the labour market and the need for educational qualifications as a possible means of over-riding, or at least diminishing the effects of, this discrimination. The girls in this study therefore had an instrumental orientation towards their school work. Fuller argues that so long as the girls felt that school was providing them with the opportunity to obtain some measure of control over their future lives by means of educational qualifications, then they were prepared to '...conform minimally within the classroom and maximally in terms of doing the work that was set'.

This instrumental orientation did not necessarily imply a total submission to and acceptance of teacher authority. Fuller reports that girls were often in conflict with teachers. They would, for example, insist on teachers 'doing their job properly'. Students' criticism of schooling does not necessarily produce student 'resistance' or the subversion of the generally acceptable teacher goals of academic achievement. As Fuller puts it:

Just because girls do not, typically, confront, does not mean they do not have their criticism of schooling (Fuller 1983:140).

Fuller's study alerts us to the fact that an analysis of classroom behaviour needs to be linked to wider social structures and students' perceptions of their desired and possible adult roles within these structures.

#### BROWN'S 'ORDINARY KIDS'

Brown's work also marks a considerable advance on previous studies. First, he does not concentrate exclusively or even primarily on male students but includes the experience of female students in his analysis. Secondly, in his analysis of student cultures in the three schools in the study he does not restrict his attention to one mode of behaviour. Instead he detects three sub-cultures which he describes as 'swots', 'rems' and 'ordinary kids'. 'Swots' are those students who conform in that they work hard and never get into trouble with teachers. 'Rems', on the other hand, are those students (mainly male) who adopt anti-school attitudes and behaviour. 'Ordinary kids' are the majority who adopt what



Brown describes as '...an alienated instrumental orientation' to the school. Finally, Brown links classroom behaviour with students' perceptions of social structures through his use of the concept of frames of reference (FORs).

'Getting in' is the FOR adopted by those students who have an alienated orientation to school. Like the 'lads' of Willis's study (1977), these students reject the values of the school and aim to enter the world of working class adults at the first opportunity. 'Getting out' is the FOR adopted by those working class students who have a normative instrumental orientation to the school. For these students, high levels of academic success are required if they are to achieve their ambition of 'getting out' of the working class. 'Getting on' is the FOR of the majority of students described by Brown as 'ordinary kids'. These students have, until recently, regarded what the school has to offer as a means of social advancement within the working class. They were thus prepared to make an effort and work for qualifications. However, Brown argues, the recent period of economic restructuring has thrown the 'ordinary kids' understanding of school and its purposes into confusion. So long as economic and social conditions generated enough 'tidy' working class jobs for school-leavers, then 'ordinary kids' were prepared to make an effort and achieve modest levels of academic success at school, thus presenting no problems to their teachers. Changing economic conditions have altered the FOR of these students; classroom behaviour that previously made sense will no longer do so.

It is clear from empirical studies such as those of Fuller (1983) and Brown (1987) that the social world of the classroom cannot be considered in isolation from wider contexts. Interactionist studies of the classroom such as that of Furlong (1976) were valuable in that they exposed the creative end of the spectrum of human behaviour. However, more recent developments in sociological theory indicate that some attention must be paid to constraints on behaviour. We are thus led back to the first of the theoretical issues outlined in the previous chapter and questions which run through the whole of this thesis. To what extent are human beings free and autonomous individuals? How far are individual actions constrained by wider social structures?

## CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter I stated that the study would be informed by symbolic interactionist theory and would begin in the classroom. I also stated that since symbolic interactionist begins at the level of meaning and action it has the potential to be used in theorising women's experience.

Some critics of symbolic interactionism claim that, as a theory, it is limited to the exploration of micro-sociological situations and is incapable of extending its explanatory power to macro-sociological structural levels. Furlong argues that although symbolic interactionism can be used to describe the gender-specific responses of pupils to schooling, explanations of those responses take us beyond the school to the level of social structure and, he claims:



....these theoretical concerns are by definition beyond the purview of interactionist thought (Furlong 1985:187).  
Emphasis added).

I argue that Furlong fails to separate interactionist theory from the uses to which it has been put by sociologists and, much more seriously, misrepresents the theoretical implications of interactionism. To be fair to Furlong, he is not alone in his criticism of the supposed inability of symbolic interactionism to deal with what other theories call 'social structure'. Also it has to be said that interactionist theory has been used and described by sociologists simply as a corrective to the determinism of 'social system' analysis. Out of an anxiety to reveal the creative aspects of social interaction, the larger framework in which such interaction is located has perhaps been neglected.

There is no inherent reason in the theory itself why symbolic interactionism should not be used to explore and attempt an explanation of the ways in which macro-sociological structures are created and maintained and equally how those regularities and structures then impinge on micro-sociological situations.

The problem with much neo-Marxist ethnography is that it makes an untenable leap from the micro-sociological level of analysis to macro-sociological level 'explanations' of the observed behaviour. Because it makes an a priori assumption about the determinants of human behaviour, this theory gets tangled into knots when it actually looks at behaviour

in a particular setting. It begins with a highly deterministic framework and then has to adapt that framework to match the observed behaviour. Concepts such as 'relative autonomy' and 'resistance' seem to be little more than efforts to make the theory fit the observed behaviour.

Symbolic interactionism begins at the level of intentions and motives. It then moves outwards from the centre of subjective perceptions to an examination of larger structural frameworks which help to shape individual intentions and motives.

As a broad basis for the study I have followed Pollard's model of classroom coping strategies (Pollard, 1982) in which he identifies three analytical layers for the contextualisation of the interactive process: social structure, institutional bias and the classroom itself. I follow Pollard's model in an attempt to explain the classroom behaviour observed in this study. Thus the study began at the level of the interactive process in the classroom. However, the wider social contexts and networks surrounding and influencing the classroom situation will neither be ignored nor will their determinant capacity be taken for granted. The analysis moves outwards from the classroom in directions suggested by the data. No prior assumptions will be made about the determinants of the observed behaviour.

In using Pollard's model to contextualise classroom processes, recent developments in symbolic interactionist theory are combined with trends in socialist feminist theory. Both insist on the empirical



investigation of specific social situations combined with a recognition of the wider social frameworks in which these micro-sociological situations are embedded. When it is the experience of girls and women that is the subject of analysis, socialist feminist theory demands that attention is given to the sexual division of labour within a capitalist patriarchy.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**



The research method used in this study is ethnography. Ethnography is simply one of the many research methods available to the social scientist in the study of human group behaviour. In common with all research methods, it has its characteristic strengths and weaknesses. No claim is made here for the inherent superiority of ethnography over other research methods. It was chosen as the most appropriate research method for the exploration of this particular research problem.

Ethnography is now well-established in educational research. A review of empirical studies employing ethnography in educational settings can be found in Hammersley (1980). Collections of readings from ethnographic studies of schools and classrooms can be found in Delamont (1984); Hammersley and Woods (1984); Hargreaves and Woods (1984).

I have been guided throughout the research process by a reading of general texts on ethnography (Burgess, 1982 and 1984; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984; Hammersley, 1983 and 1992b; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Woods, 1986), ethnographic studies of educational institutions both in Britain (Ball, 1981; Burgess, 1983; Davies, 1984; Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; King, 1978; Measor and Woods, 1984; Pollard, 1985; Sharp and Green, 1975; Turner, 1983; Willis, 1977; Woods, 1979) and in North America (Becker et al, 1961; Everhart, 1983; Valli, 1986), and ethnographic studies of settings other than schools (Griffin, 1985; McNally, 1979; Pollert, 1981; Spradley and Mann, 1975).

In this chapter I give an account of the different stages of the research process. It would be possible to present this information in a such a way as to give the impression that it was a smooth process which followed recommended text book patterns. Such an account would be pure fiction. The temptation to write such a fictional account of the research process is great, but it is rejected on two grounds. First, it would be false to the experience itself and secondly it would do nothing to add to cumulative efforts to understand the limits and possibilities of social science research. It is largely for this reason that I feel it important to dedicate a whole chapter to methodological issues. The chapter ends with a short account of the field role of the researcher and its impact on the research process.

#### PRELIMINARY STAGES

Ethnography demands no precise formulation of a research design; more usually the researcher enters the field with a set of 'foreshadowed problems' (Malinowski 1922:9 quoted in Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:29). During the preliminary stages of the research these act as a guide to the selection of the research setting and to precise cases within the setting.

As I explained in Chapter One, the research problem was identified in broad outline by the findings of a small project I carried out as part of the course work requirements of a taught MEd course (Black, 1984). Hammersley and Atkinson argue that the prompt to field work can be 'a surprising fact or set of facts' (Hammersley and Atkinson,



1983:30). An analysis of the enrolment patterns of male and female students in NAFE nationally and at Riverbank College yielded some surprising facts. The first was the large numbers of female students compared with male students who enrol on courses in NAFE. The second was the extent to which female students are to be found on vocational courses which limit their post-course opportunities to traditionally female occupations. Why do they do this? Why choose a post-school option that limits, rather than extends, opportunities and life chances? The analysis of enrolment patterns in NAFE nationally and in Riverbank College raised many questions that could best be answered by going into the field, observing classroom life and asking questions.

The decision was therefore made to adopt what Burgess describes as the 'traditional anthropological field research model' (Burgess, 1984a:6). This research model implies a commitment on the part of the researcher to an involvement in the cultural world under investigation. The researcher adopts a field role and becomes the main research instrument, observing and recording behaviour in natural settings. The overall aim is that an understanding of this cultural world should emerge from observation in the field and interaction with the research population.

Having identified the research problem, I looked for a setting in which it could be adequately explored. When I began the research I was a full-time teacher in Riverbank College. I knew that whatever field work I did would have to fit in the spaces in my own teaching programme.

Although there were three other colleges of further education within a twenty mile radius of West Port, even the small amount of time that would have to be spent travelling made the choice of any one of them out of the question. It had to be Riverbank College. There are obvious advantages and disadvantages in carrying out research in an educational institution where an insider identity is already established. Since I was simultaneously a teacher and a researcher in the college, I describe myself as a teacher-ethnographer [1]. I argue that this dual identity and its impact on the research process cannot be ignored. It is therefore written into this account of the research methods used.

#### ACCESS

Gaining access to the research site is a delicate, complex and continual operation. The teacher-ethnographer already has an insider's intimate knowledge of the research setting and, in many ways, this knowledge gives an advantage over an outsider looking for access. I was looking for an all-female enclave within Riverbank College and I knew where to find one without having to go through the time consuming process of 'mapping out' whole areas of the college. My first choice of research setting was the nursery nurses' section in the Department of Humanities, where young women followed a full-time, two year course which prepared them to be nannies. I first approached the Principal, then the Head of Department in which the section was located and, having received their approval, I made an appointment to see the section head in March 1985. The meeting was a disaster. I had totally discounted her knowledge of me. She had been appointed while I was on a full-time secondment in



1983/84 and her only knowledge of me was that I had been away on an MEd. course and come back with a strong interest in gender inequalities in education. She clearly feared that my research interest in the section would result in some kind of critical exposé of sex-stereotyping on the nursery nurses courses. The interview progressed in such a way that I knew it would be impossible to proceed with my proposal to work in the section.

I had to find another all-female enclave within college and chose the secretarial section in the Department of Business Studies. From the start my research interest was welcome there. I have elsewhere (Black, 1987) attempted to analyse the reasons for my failure in one area and success in the other. While it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions on this question, my experience taught me that an insider's knowledge of the research site can be an advantage in some, but not all, respects. What has to be remembered is that insiders have a knowledge of the teacher-ethnographer which might act to the disadvantage of the latter. I had chosen what I thought would be the perfect setting to investigate my research problem, but in the end had to make do with what I thought at the time was very much of a second best setting. My experience was clearly quite different from that of Pollard when he began his ethnographic study of the primary school in which he was already established as a teacher. He claims that:

....actually being a teacher, as I was when I began these studies, provides a flying start for anyone investigating aspects of schools (Pollard, 1985:36).

The next stage in gaining access was an even more delicate operation. At this stage I was looking for access to classrooms. The Head of the Department of Business Studies was happy for me to conduct my research in the secretarial section, but she made it quite clear that I would have to seek the agreement of individual teachers when I wanted access to classrooms. This seemed perfectly acceptable to me. As a teacher myself I would hate to face the prospect of a researcher coming regularly into any of my classrooms, particularly if I had been given no choice in the matter. Hargreaves (1967) explains the way in which his role as an observer in classrooms took on something of the quality of an inspector. He describes the avoidance techniques of some teachers who, while they had not denied him access, were clearly unenthusiastic about his presence in their classrooms. I was determined that I would make every effort to avoid creating that kind of situation.

Perhaps in most primary and secondary schools the isolation of the teacher within the classroom has been broken down by new teaching methods, but this has not yet happened in Riverbank College. If they have to intrude, people knock at the classroom door and apologise for doing so; the classroom is very much private territory. At this stage, therefore, I had to ask colleagues to volunteer to admit me into their classrooms while knowing that it was something that, as a teacher, I would probably be very reluctant to agree to do. This self-knowledge has made me scrupulous, perhaps over-scrupulous, about seeking access to classrooms. I felt that I must rely entirely on enthusiastic volunteers and give teacher responses to requests for classroom access priority



over any ideas I had about the direction of the research. At the time I regarded my role as a teacher-ethnographer as temporary; when the study was completed I expected to revert to my former role as a teacher in the college. Even while I was carrying out my research, I felt that my teacher identity was stronger than my researcher identity. The teachers in the secretarial section were primarily my colleagues, not research subjects.

Because I decided I could only use enthusiastic volunteers, my research took a direction that I did not anticipate at the outset. I explained in Chapter One that I wanted to place the central focus of the research on long-standing LEA sponsored full-time office skills courses for 16+ school leavers. As things turned out, the most enthusiastic volunteer was keen for me to observe her typing classes with TOPS students. She also encouraged other teachers who were working with the same group of students to volunteer. The outcome of this was that in my first term of field work I found myself each week observing six hours of TOPS classes and only two hours with the 16+ group that I had intended would be the centre of my research.

In the early stages of seeking access, therefore, I was forced to acknowledge that my dual identity in the college had affected the direction of the research project. Even before I began the field work I had been compelled to change my original choice of research setting. At the time I felt despondent. In retrospect, the experience was a salutary

one in that it made me alert to the further possibility of researcher-effect.

### FIELD WORK

Field work began in September 1985 and continued through four academic years (1985/6; 1986/7; 1987/8; 1988/9). As a full-time teacher in the college I had available only a limited number of free hours during the working week that could be dedicated to any form of research activity. The main method of data collection was by observation in a sample of classrooms. As I described in Chapter One, periods of classroom observation were supplemented by interviews with students and teachers.

Student interviews were restricted to those students who knew me from my periods of observation in at least one of the classrooms in which they were being taught. This decision was made since I felt it important to build up at least a flimsy relationship as an observer before students were asked to submit themselves to what I felt they might regard as the ordeal of being interviewed. Throughout the research process I have attempted to establish a friendly and appreciative relationship with both teachers and students by sharing their classroom experience. Only after a sufficient period of time has passed for the establishment of this relationship have I felt able to begin a round of interviews, particularly with students. Burgess argues that:

In any project involving unstructured interviews the relationship between the researcher and those who are researched is crucial (Burgess, 1984a:107).



The problem in colleges of further education is that courses are short. In Riverbank College most vocational courses last for one year. With very few exceptions, this precludes the possibility of building up a relationship with any particular group of students and following the whole group or even a selected portion of a group through anything longer than a one year course.

This was particularly important factor in my association with the 16+ students on General Secretarial courses. As I explain later in the chapter, I felt uneasy in my relationship with these students. For their part, they knew that I was a teacher in the college. Some had friends who were students in my classes. It was therefore difficult for them to regard me as anything other than a teacher. For my part, General Secretarial students were the same age as the majority of the students I taught. I therefore found it difficult to shake off my teacherly attitudes towards young people in this age group when we encountered each other either inside or outside the classroom.

Questionnaires were also used to collect data. Later in the chapter I explain why and how these were used. The Head of Department also gave me access to student folders which contained such documentation as a student's original application form and college progress reports. Other relevant documents such as college prospectuses and local press cuttings recording events in the secretarial section or the Department were also collected.

I now describe these methods of data collection in more detail.

#### CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

The first and most intensive period of classroom observation was carried out through the academic year 1985/6. Two separate groups of students were observed. The first of these was a cohort of 16+ General Secretarial students on a one year full-time course sponsored by the LEA. These students had the option of staying on into a second year if they wished. In most years about five or six students (approximately 25% of each cohort) took this option. The second group was a cohort of TOPS students on a full-time course lasting for thirty weeks provided by the College in conjunction with the MSC. The course was designed for mature students who wished to train or retrain for office work. Over the year 220 hours of classroom life were observed.

During the second phase of fieldwork (1986/7) a total of 210 hours of classroom life were observed. The groups observed were parallel cohorts to the groups observed during the first phase of field work, that is, one group of General Secretarial students and one group of TOPS students. For both groups of students, their programme of study was almost identical to that of the 1985/6 cohort. The observation of two parallel cohorts was done for two closely related reasons. The first was defensive. I felt that my observation of the two 1985/6 cohorts was 'thin'; any statements made about students on full-time office skills courses could not rest on the basis of 220 hours of observation carried out in one academic year. The second reason was related to emerging



theoretical issues. As I explained in Chapter One, I was immediately struck by the lack of discord in the classroom life I observed. The general quality of classroom life was so very different from that recorded in the majority of classroom studies that I felt it necessary to seek for disconfirming examples of the conformist student behaviour that I had observed in 1985/6.

For the same reasons, I continued to observe a further cohort of General Secretarial students during the third phase of the field work (1987/8). By this time TOPS courses for mature students were no longer available. They were replaced by short thirteen week courses under the Job Training Scheme (JTS) sponsored by the MSC. Under this scheme students could 'pick and mix' attendance in various office skills subjects. The most popular subject was typing. In order to maintain the balance between observation of General Secretarial students and mature students I therefore observed two cohorts of JTS students in typing classes during the academic year 1987/8 [2]. In all I observed 60 hours of classroom life.

During the fourth phase (1988/9) I did no regular week by week observation with any individual group but 'dropped in' on a variety of courses. This variety included some observation on General Secretarial classes, but also included observation in a typing class made up of full-time students who were in their second year at the college. Some of these students were on a specialist Medical Secretarial course planned as a two year course from the outset. The remainder of this class had

followed the General Secretarial course in 1987/8 and had decided to stay for a second year in order to improve on the qualifications they had gained during their first year. The two groups had been combined for most subjects since numbers in each group were too small to run separately. I did this in order to broaden my coverage of the work done in the secretarial section. I also felt it important to keep up with a brand new development in the section and so included some observation in the Office Skills Centre. This was a newly established room in the secretarial section where both full-time and part-time students could 'drop in' for individual tuition in either traditional typing skills or a variety of computer-based skills. The total time spent on classroom observation in 1988/9 amounted to 20 hours.

## INTERVIEWS

Data collection by observation in the classroom was supplemented by informal interviews with students and teachers.

### Mature students

The first round of interviews conducted was with mature TOPS students in the 1985/6 cohort. Arranging a time for interviews was difficult. I recognised that neither students nor teachers would have agreed to classroom time being used for interviews. This meant that I had to rely on students being willing to give up a lunch break (on the two days of the week when their break time coincided with mine) or time after classes ended at five o'clock. Again, I could only use volunteers.



I presented each student who was interviewed with a short agenda of topics. The first was a glaringly obvious question about the motives for returning to full-time education as a mature student. The remainder of the interview agenda was a simple one, inviting students to talk about their past educational and employment experience, their present responses to the course they were following and their anticipated occupational future. I made it clear at the beginning of the interview that these topics did not represent fixed boundaries. The main aim was to avoid placing my interests and pre-occupations at the top of the interview agenda. I felt it was important to be sensitive to respondents and let their agenda take over if necessary. For example, some TOPS students were experiencing difficulties with their marriage. Although I was aware of this both from unavoidable eavesdropping on student conversations in the classroom and from comments made to me by teachers outside the classroom, I did not make domestic life one of my interview topics. However, when a TOPS student went beyond the boundaries of my interview agenda, in almost all cases it was to tell me about their domestic situation and how it influenced their past, present and future. The same format was followed in interviews with subsequent cohorts of mature students both on the 1986/7 TOPS course and on JTS courses in 1987/8.

#### General Secretarial students

A similar interview format was followed with General Secretarial students. All students who were interviewed were presented with a short agenda of topics, but it was made clear that this agenda was flexible.

It began with asking them to explain why they enrolled on the General Secretarial course. This was an important question to ask since, unlike TOPS students, 16+ students have a wide range of course options available to them in Riverbank College. The interview agenda also included their present responses to the course they were following and their anticipated occupational future.

### Teachers

The pattern and timing of interviews with teachers was different from that adopted with students. Students are a transient population and I had to catch them quickly before they had left the college. Teachers are a more permanent feature of college life. I felt that I could therefore afford the luxury of more than one interview with each of them spread over the period of the field work.

As I explained in Chapter One, periods of classroom observation led me to an interest in the work history of teachers from the time they left school to the present. I had simply not anticipated how important a teacher's work history would be in explaining elements of her current pedagogical practice. The first round of interviews therefore focussed on teachers' accounts of their work history. In this first round I interviewed the eleven full-time teachers in the section. For reasons which I explain in Chapter Four, I also included one part-time teacher and the Head of Department of Business Studies.



My grand plan was then to have a further two rounds of interviews with each teacher. In one I intended to elicit teacher typifications of different cohorts of TOPS and General Secretarial students. In the other I intended to ask each teacher to talk through her current teaching programme explaining how long she spent teaching what subjects to which groups of students and how they felt about their programme. I felt it necessary to locate the classroom work that I observed within the larger pattern first of an individual teacher's teaching programme and secondly that of the whole secretarial section. However, teachers' time is a valuable commodity and I soon discovered that few were willing to subject themselves to multiple interviews. The last two topics were therefore not explored so exhaustively as the first.

#### Recording data

A tape recorder was used to record data collected both in the classroom and in interviews with students and teachers. Although a tape recorder cannot record everything and is no substitute for human effort, its use releases the researcher from the mechanics of recording to the performance of higher level tasks which improve the quality of the data collected.

The tape recorder was introduced into the classroom with the prior agreement of the teacher and only after the third or fourth week of observation. By this time I felt that my presence had lost its novelty value to both teachers and students so that the addition of a tape recorder would not be particularly disturbing [3]. Tape recordings were

supplemented by notes taken on the spot to record non-verbal activity and act as a summary of the main phases of each lesson. As I gained confidence in the tape recorder's capacity to record the data I required, so I found that I became more of a participant-observer than an observer. Since my head was up and I was looking around the classroom rather than furiously scribbling notes, teachers often invited my participation in the lesson. Students, too, eventually came to share their feelings with me either by a facial or verbal expression.

The use of a tape recorder is, I feel, even more valuable in interviews. All interviews were tape recorded with the agreement of the respondents and later transcribed. The use of a tape recorder enables the interview to be conducted and flow like a normal conversation. Eye contact can be maintained, enabling the researcher to be sensitive to respondents' reactions. This is particularly important when interviews are unstructured. I would argue that a tape recorder is less intrusive and disturbing for the respondent than the sight of the researcher scribbling notes. Even if the interviewer overcomes this problem by leaving note making until after the interview, that simply creates a different problem of accuracy of recall. In supporting the use of the tape recorder in interviews, Woods argues:

There is no other way of recapturing the fullness and faithfulness of words and idioms (Woods, 1986:81).

Since I had very strong feelings that I wanted to be able to preserve and reproduce the exact words and the authentic tone of voice of the



people being interviewed, I felt that a tape recorder was an essential data-collecting instrument.

## QUESTIONNAIRES

During the period of field work I used two types of questionnaire. One was a postal questionnaire that was sent out to students who had completed their course and were in the labour market. The other was a questionnaire that I gave in person to General Secretarial students while they were still in college. I deal with this second type of questionnaire first.

### Classroom questionnaires

Time was an acute problem throughout the period of field work. The demands of my own teaching programme and the full programme followed by both TOPS and General Secretarial students meant that it was extremely difficult to arrange times for interview. On the whole, TOPS students were more willing than General Secretarial students to give up their free time to be interviewed. I have already indicated that some volunteered to stay in college after classes ended at five o'clock and others were interviewed during mutual lunch breaks. With very few exceptions, General Secretarial students were not willing to give up their free time to be interviewed, so I had to devise an alternative method of data collection to the interview.

Students on General Secretarial courses were given the opportunity of taking one GCE 'O' level subject in addition to their office skills

subjects. Those students who at school had not passed English Language either at GCE 'O' level or CSE Grade 1 were placed in a GCE 'O' level English Language class. This group was taught by a specialist teacher of English who was based, as I was, in the Department of Humanities. In 1985/6, 1986/7 and 1987/8 I managed to persuade the person who taught English Language to these General Secretarial groups to exchange a lesson with me. While these teachers spent one hour with one of my classes I took over the General Secretarial class. During this time I asked students to write down answers to a set of questions which I delivered verbally. In this way questionnaire data were collected from a total of fifty-one General Secretarial students over three years.

As I explain later in the chapter, even when I managed to interview General Secretarial students, I was dissatisfied with both the quality and the quantity of the data that these interviews yielded. By administering a verbal questionnaire in the way described I felt that at least I could improve on the quantity of data gathered.

#### Postal questionnaires

The other type of questionnaire I used was a more conventional postal questionnaire (see Appendix). In January 1987 I sent questionnaires to all students who had been on the TOPS and the General Secretarial courses in 1985/6. The main purpose of this questionnaire was to find out how students had fared in the labour market and how, in the light of their employment experience, they rated the course they had followed. The response, ten in all, was disappointingly low; it was scarcely 25%



of the total number of students in each group. The cost of carrying out this exercise was so high and the response so thin that I decided to discontinue it in future years.

Having described the research methods employed during the study I now turn to consider the field role of the researcher and its impact on the whole research process.

### THE FIELD ROLE

In educational settings, Ball (1983) suggests that the most important decision for the researcher to make is whether or not to teach. This assumes that the researcher enters the setting for the period of the research, adopts a field role for the period of the research and then departs (Ball 1981; Burgess 1983; Hammersley 1984; Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970; Woods 1979). My situation was different; I already had an established role as a teacher within the research setting. While I realised that I would be deprived of the luxury of adopting the role of my choice, I felt that my established role gave me some advantages. Having taught for twelve years in the college I felt I had some valuable insider knowledge that would enable me take some short cuts, particularly in gaining access to a suitable research site. As I have explained, experience taught me that being an insider is a double-edged weapon.

As the field work progressed, particularly after I had run through the first stage of informal interviews with both groups of students in

the 1985/6 cohorts, I became aware of the fact that I felt much more rapport with the TOPS students (age range 20 to 40) than with the 16+ group of General Secretarial students. Burgess warns teacher-ethnographers that:

.....the teacher role may result in over-identification with the staff world through an inability to take on the stranger role in relation to pupil behaviour (Burgess, 1980:169).

This would certainly hold true of my early reactions to the 16+ group. They are the same age as the students I have taught for many years. When I was in a classroom with them I found I could not rid myself of my teacher reactions to any misdemeanours that I witnessed. At times I felt intensely irritable and even almost hostile towards some of their behaviour. My sense of justice was frustrated by not being able to do anything about what I had seen or heard. However, I felt a strong identification with the TOPS students and their struggles to learn new skills and so improve their situation in the labour market.

Almost without realising it was happening I found I was collecting more interview data on the TOPS students than on the 16+ students. Collecting interview data from the former group was more interesting and I found it easier to handle as a social encounter than collecting interview data from the latter group. As soon as I realised what was happening I made efforts to redress the balance, but I feel that I was not really successful. This tension within my research has made me aware of the huge gulf that separates me from the 16+ students; not only am I a teacher, but I am an old teacher. Riddell (1987) describes how her small stature acted as a kind of camouflage for her presence in the



classroom. In my case small stature is not enough; grey hair gives the game away.

It was not only age that obviously marked me out from the teenage students but also dress. I felt that I had to observe the unwritten dress code of the teachers within the section. Although no dress rules are spelled out for students while they are in college, they are explicitly instructed not to wear casual clothes, particularly trousers, when they go out of college on work experience. Teachers would frequently comment to me on the way that students dress, expressing approval of the smart and formal style, disapproval of the teenage uniform of jeans and tee-shirts and extreme disapproval of anything that they considered 'too sexy'. They dressed in such a way as to set an example of the preferred style to students. These teachers were my colleagues; I felt I could not possibly contravene the unwritten rules of how to dress without undermining the example they were trying to set to their students. The result was that in both age and dress, I look very much like most of the teachers in the secretarial section.

My identity as a teacher has probably blocked collection of data from the 16+ students. I found that in informal interviews they tended to wait for me to ask all the questions and I nervously talked far more than I should to patch over what I feared would otherwise be an awkward silence. Nothing like this happened with the TOPS students; informal interviews with them ran as fluently as they did with the teachers. The 16+ students know I am a teacher although I do not teach on their

course. In some respects, the fact that I do not teach them acts against me. In their eyes I am a teacher who seems only to indulge in the eccentric activity of watching other teachers teach. As they do not seem to be able to get a clear grasp on exactly what I am, their suspicions are aroused. When I was trying to explain my research to one group of General Secretarial students and how interesting I found it, one of them asked, 'Why don't you do it all the time, then?' To these students I am neither a proper teacher nor a proper researcher. The TOPS students expressed no surprise at the fact that I was doing two jobs simultaneously; most of them, as working wives and mothers, had been doing it for a long time.

In spite of two decades or more of educational research in Britain in which qualitative research methods are employed, researchers are peculiarly reticent about incorporating their own experiences into their reports. An interesting development in the last decade has been the production of collections of autobiographical accounts of the research process (Burgess, 1984b and 1985). Burgess is very much concerned with ridding the literature of accounts of the research process which reduce it to a series of mechanical steps. His aim is to encourage the 'publication of first person accounts of social research' (Burgess, 1984b:2). Burgess makes the point that such personalised methodological discussions usually appear, if at all, as appendices to research reports. Although I found these collections of post hoc confessions immensely cheering and consoling when I was about to embark on my field work they are, nevertheless, productions which remain separate and



distinct from the formal presentation of the research report. For all his admirable intentions, Burgess's collections, by creating an environment in which autobiographical confessions can be made safely, do not challenge the conventional end-product of research from which such statements are expunged.

The researcher's role and consequent identity in the research setting is of central significance to the whole research process. Stanley and Wise argue that the researcher's own self is the 'crucial variable' in research although, as they admit, it is 'frequently invisible in terms of the presentation of this research' (Stanley and Wise, 1983:158). If it is accepted that in qualitative research the researcher is the main research instrument then the researcher must be present in any account of the research. To extract the researcher's subjective experience from the research report and consign it to a separate existence in a post hoc 'confession' is a serious omission. It was my own experience rather than anything in the literature that forced me into an awareness of the central significance of the researcher's identity.

## CONCLUSION

It would be impossible to maintain that my identity has had no effect on the research process. From beginning to end, the fact that I had an already established identity as a teacher within the research setting influenced the direction of the research. There seems to be no advantage

to be gained in attempting to maintain the fiction of the detached, neutral observer in qualitative social science research.

The significance of the researcher's identity in ethnographic educational research is generally recognised. For example Hammersley and Atkinson state:

The fact that the researcher may play an important part in shaping the context becomes central to the analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:18).

Rather strangely, though, it is not usual practice to incorporate autobiographical accounts of the research process in the final research report. Burgess's collections (Burgess, 1984b and 1985) simply highlight the fact that the researchers who contributed to the collections did not include first person accounts of their research into their original report.

My concern is for educational research. Woods (1986) argues persuasively that the gap existing between researchers and teachers, between educational theory and practice, might be narrowed if teachers were to carry out ethnographic research in their own classrooms or institutions. While agreeing in principle with Woods, I would argue that the methodological implications of being a researcher in an educational institution, where the teacher role is already established, needs much closer scrutiny than it has been given so far in the literature.

However, I would not want my final comment on the research methods employed to be negative. Being a teacher-ethnographer presents problems.



My argument is that if qualitative research methods are to be refined and improved then problems need to be acknowledged in the research report and not consigned to some post hoc confessional arena. In spite of the problems I encountered as a teacher-ethnographer, the research methods employed in this study are vindicated in the findings presented in subsequent chapters.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]. Much of the material in this chapter is based on a paper 'The Janus Factor: the Teacher-Ethnographer in a College of Further Education' presented at the BERA Annual Conference, Manchester Polytechnic, 2nd to 5th September 1987. When I wrote the paper, I assumed that after I had completed my PhD research project there would be no change in my role as a full-time teacher in Riverbank College. That did not happen. I took early retirement from teaching in July 1989 in order to take up a post as a Research Associate. However, I have left the chapter in its original form since I was a teacher-ethnographer during the period of field work.

[2] I make no further specific reference to JTS students. Data collected in interviews and in observing them in the classroom supported the findings drawn from data collected from TOPS students. There were no significant differences between the two groups. JTS students are therefore included in later references to 'TOPS students' or 'mature students'.

[3] My fears about the intrusive nature of the presence of a tape recorder were overcome by two events. The first was when the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students held an end-of-course party to which I was invited. When I arrived I was asked 'Where's your tape recorder? Don't you want to record our party?' The disappointment about the absence of the tape recorder was genuine and was a recurring subject of jokes throughout the evening. The second was at Christmas 1986 when the 1986/7 cohort of TOPS students sent me a Christmas card addressed to 'Edie and her tape recorder'.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

The sexual division of labour, both in the public sphere of paid employment and in the domestic sphere, is obvious. It is so obvious that the labelling of some tasks and roles as 'men's work' and others as 'women's work' is regarded by many people as a natural feature of social life. Feminist analyses of the adult role of women begin where such easy assumptions end in that they seek for deeper explanations of what elsewhere is simplistically regarded as 'natural'.

Outside feminist literature it is easy to find such sweeping and uninformed observations as this:

It is of course common-place that men and women have different degrees and kinds of involvement in the occupational system....Although there is a minority of women both single and married who have strong commitments to their jobs most women enter the occupational world only as a short adventure between school and marriage or else they work as a means of supplementing the family income (Mason, Dressel and Bain, 1959:372).

Within feminist literature there exists a much more theoretically well-informed body of work that seriously attempts to explain why it is that women's participation in the labour market differs from that of men.

In this chapter I first give a brief account of feminist research on the sexual division of labour. Then I draw on work history data collected in informal interviews with the teachers in the study.



Each individual's work history is divided into two phases. The first phase runs from initial entry into the labour market on leaving school up to departure from the labour market which, in the majority of cases, occurred not on marriage but just before the birth of the first child. As I have already indicated in Chapter One, the teachers in the study were employed as office workers during this first phase in their work history, a phase which Mason, Dressel and Bain (1959) would identify as a 'short adventure'. Data collected on this first phase of labour market activity are used later in Chapter Eight where I examine the influence of teachers' past experience as office workers on their present pedagogical practice.

The second phase in the work history runs from re-entry into the labour market to the present. Data drawn from this second phase are used in this chapter to demonstrate the various ways in which the teachers struck a calculative balance between the dual demands on their labour power in the home and in paid employment. As the detailed examination of the data will demonstrate, motives for returning to the labour market were far more varied and complex than 'supplementing the family income' as was suggested by Mason, Dressel and Bain (1959). In order fully to understand the labour market participation of women some account has to be given of the sexual division of labour.

#### THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

As MacDonald (1981) argues, biological differences of sex can explain the division of sexual labour but cannot explain the sexual division of

labour. Physiological sex differences between males and females determine that the female role in the biological reproduction of the species (the division of sexual labour) is that of child-bearer. At the time of writing, this is an immutable fact of life. On the other hand, the designation of some tasks and roles as appropriately masculine and others as appropriately feminine (the sexual division of labour) is a social construction. Definitions of 'men's work' and 'women's work' are not immutable but can be seen to vary temporally and culturally.

Feminist analyses of our own and other cultures have enabled a conceptual distinction to be made between sex and gender (Oakley, 1972). 'Sex' is used to indicate biological sex which, in by far the majority of cases, is obvious from the moment of birth. 'Gender' is used to indicate the culturally acquired sense of sexual identity as masculine or feminine. In our culture, at the present time, so-called 'masculine' characteristics include such instrumental traits as activity, aggression, ambition, competitiveness, technical proficiency. So-called 'feminine' characteristics include the more expressive traits such as passivity, affection, obedience, warmth.

Physiological differences of sex determine that women bear children and so, around the birth of each child, need to withdraw for a short period of time from the public sphere of production. A wide range of ideological assumptions about women's role in society have been bolted on to this incontestable biological necessity. Feminist historical analyses of the labour process (Bradley, 1989; Hall, 1982a



and 1982b; Pinchbeck, 1981) have identified the industrial revolution as a decisive turning point in that production was removed from the home to the factory, so physically separating the sphere of production from that of reproduction. After this physical separation of the two spheres of activity, the public sphere of production became identified as a male arena. Women's biological role as child-bearer extended into child-caring and generally nurturing and caring for the needs of others, thus confining women to the domestic sphere for longer periods than is demanded by child-bearing in itself. Women have thus become ideologically identified with the domestic sphere, with the reproduction and maintenance of the workforce.

#### WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET

In spite of their ideological identification with the domestic sphere, women are present in the public sphere of paid employment in increasingly large numbers. In 1986 over nine million women were in paid employment, representing 44.5% of the labour force (Coyle, 1988:2). This represents a long term trend which began in a period of economic growth in the late 1950s. This trend has persisted even throughout the recent period of economic decline and is expected to continue (EOC, 1989:6). However, it is clear that the pattern of women's participation in the labour market is very different from that of men.

First, there are distinct patterns of segregation between the sexes. Women are disproportionately clustered in a small range of

occupations; secretarial and general clerical work account for over a half of all women's non-manual paid employment. The other occupations in which women are heavily concentrated are manual services such as cleaning and catering and the 'caring' professions such as social work and nursing. Hakim (1979) describes this as 'horizontal segregation'. In other occupational areas the total numbers of men and women employed are more evenly balanced but women are disproportionately concentrated on the lower rungs of the salary scales and men in the better paid and more prestigious managerial positions. Hakim (1979) describes this as 'vertical segregation'.

The vertical segregation identified by Hakim (1979) is of particular relevance to this study. Clerical work falls within this category since it is unambiguously identified as 'women's work'. The teachers in the study first entered the labour market as office workers. As teachers on office skills courses their work is now to prepare students for entry into this same feminised segment of the labour market.

Second, women's participation in the labour market tends to be briefer than that of men. This relative brevity is the consequence of two closely linked features of women's paid employment. One is the amount of part-time work which is carried out by women. The other is the fractured nature of women's labour market participation over the life cycle.



Coyle (1988) states that by 1986 nearly half of all women in paid employment were working in part-time jobs. She argues that this phenomenon has to be related to the availability of part-time work. Between 1979 and 1986 part-time jobs as a percentage of all jobs increased from 16.9% to 21% (Coyle,1988:5). These jobs are almost exclusively carried out by women. Martin and Roberts point out that the most common pattern of part-time working for women is a reduced working day, rather than a reduced number of days per week (Martin and Roberts, 1984:36). Within this pattern, the actual hours worked largely depend on the age of a woman's children. Women with children at school tend to work a part-time shift that spans the middle of the day so that they are free to see their children into school and meet them at the end of the school day. Women with children under school age are more likely to be found working an evening or night shift (Martin and Roberts,1984). Work history data collected from both teachers and mature students in the study reflect this concern of women to enter the labour market on terms that will enable them to give adequate care to their children.

The second distinctive pattern of women's labour market participation is its fractured and changing nature over the life cycle. This is largely a product of the various ways in which the majority of women integrate unpaid domestic labour with paid employment at different stages of the life cycle. Dex (1985:4) identifies this as an 'M' shaped profile or a 'bimodal' pattern of labour market participation. The first peak in the 'M' shaped profile occurs between the ages of twenty and twenty-four and the second between the ages of

forty-five and fifty. The general 'M' shape remains, although it is subject to slight shifts corresponding to demographic and behavioural changes. The first peak of the 'M' profile is described by Dex as 'initial work' phase. This is usually a period of full-time employment which extends from leaving school until giving up work during the first pregnancy. This corresponds exactly with the first phase that I identified in the work history patterns of the teachers in the study. Dex describes the trough between the first and second peaks of the 'M' profile as the 'family formation' phase. This period includes a number of possible patterns of activity. Some women return to the labour market between the birth of each child, most usually on a part-time basis. Others stay out of the labour market until after the birth of their last child. The work history data analysed later in this chapter demonstrate the varied patterns of behaviour of the teachers in the study during this period. Dex then describes the second peak of the 'M' profile as the 'final work' phase. This is a period during which women return to the labour market as their child-care responsibilities diminish. This phase is usually characterised by a switch from part-time to full-time employment. Analysis of the work history data of the teachers in the study demonstrate clearly that the return to full-time employment was a large step for them to take, causing most of them considerable anxiety since their priority was adequacy of child-care.

It can be seen from the analysis provided by Dex (1985) that in order to understand the patterns of women's paid employment it is essential to relate those patterns to the demands on women's unpaid



domestic labour. I now turn to the work history data collected from the teachers in the study. The second phase of this work history is marked in all cases by attempts to balance dual demands on labour power. Patterns of labour market participation during this period cannot be fully understood without reference to women's domestic responsibilities, particularly responsibilities for child-care.

#### THE TEACHERS IN THE STUDY

Work history data were collected through informal interviews with thirteen teachers: the Head of the Department of Business Studies, the eleven full-time teachers in the Secretarial Section of the department and one part-time teacher. Several part-time teachers are employed in the secretarial section, but I decided to concentrate on full-timers for two reasons. The first reason was purely pragmatic; full-timers were more readily accessible for interview. Moreover, they were better known to me and I therefore felt they would be more willing to respond to a request for data about their personal lives. The second was that I soon became aware from interview data that most part-timers are full-timers in the making. All the full-timers interviewed had begun their teaching career as part-timers and gradually progressed to full-time status. This appeared to be such a common pattern that, for the purpose of this study, a distinction between full-timers and part-timers did not seem to be a such a significant factor as to make it worthwhile pursuing. I also included the Head of Department since, unusually for a department in a college of further education, the Head of this particular department is a woman. Her work history follows a pattern

similar to that of her teacher colleagues in the study; she began as an office worker, married, had children and then returned to the labour market as a teacher. The difference between her and the eleven full-time teachers in the study is that she has moved to a higher point on the salary and status scales in further education than they have.

In this chapter I concentrate on recording the accounts of the work history of four of the teachers in the study. I have concentrated on only four teachers since the work history patterns that I recorded were so similar that I feel nothing has been lost by reducing thirteen individual accounts to four. I have called the four teachers here Dorothy, Christine, Jenny and Marianna. During the time-span of the study Dorothy was a part-time teacher, Christine and Jenny were full-time teachers and Marianna was the Head of Department.

The second phase is the more complicated of the two phases identified in the work history data. Sometimes the two phases overlap slightly. Before her children were born and while she was still working full-time as a secretary, Dorothy had begun to think about and prepare herself for the possibility of teaching as a way of combining child-care and paid employment. Marianna had a little teaching experience before her children were born and so, fortuitously, was able to capitalise on this past experience when she wanted to return to the labour market. Christine's experience was almost a compound of the two. Like Marianna she had done some teaching during the first phase of her work history, before her children were born. As Dorothy did, she had



also taken an evening class course at West Port Technical College which would give her an RSA teaching qualification. Unlike Dorothy, though, Christine did not embark on this course with the intention of teaching. Jenny's experience was quite different from that of these three in that teaching was not her first, but her third, choice of occupation when she eventually returned to the labour market.

The details of exactly how and when these four teachers returned to the labour market are varied, but two important themes emerge from an analysis of the data. The first, dominant, theme is that of the conscious planning and decision-making which took place. The labour market participation of these teachers is framed by the macro-sociological structures of the sexual division of labour within a capitalist patriarchy, but that is not to say that their actions can be reduced to the level of simple responses to these structures. Each individual made her own choices and decisions. While there are limits to freedom of choice, it is important not to lose sight of the possibilities that exist for choice. The second theme is that of fortuitous opportunity. For example, the way in which Christine describes her re-entry into the labour market as a part-time teacher makes it sound like one of the fateful coincidences that are scattered through the novels of Thomas Hardy. She explains that while she was '...pushing the children out in a pram', she '...just happened to meet someone from the college' who asked her if she would be willing to teach an evening class. She adds 'It just happened to fit in, just as though it had been tailor-made.' These two themes together illustrate

the way in which labour market participation is shaped both by supply and demand.

I begin with extracts from an interview with Dorothy, the single part-time teacher included in the study. She was a full-time teacher 'in the making'. All of the teachers who were full-time during the life span of the study had at some earlier time passed through Dorothy's preparatory stage of being a part-time teacher. Her current experience therefore stands as an illustration of the past experience of the full-time teachers.

#### DOROTHY

I got to know Dorothy just as I began the field work for the study. She was teaching a few hours part-time, mainly in the evening. At the same time she was following the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) course run by the college that would give her a teaching qualification. As part of this course she was required to do a number of hours of teaching practice. I observed her in action in the classroom for six weeks in the autumn term of 1985 when she temporarily took over the teaching of Secretarial Duties to the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students as part of this period of teaching practice.

#### The end of Phase One

After leaving school Dorothy worked for West Port's largest industrial employer, a firm known locally by its initials and which I shall call ABC. In Chapter Eight I use interview data to describe how she worked



her way up the office hierarchy as it exists for women. She began as an office junior and her last promotion was to private secretary to Mr Williams, the chief buyer for ABC. This promotion came just as Dorothy was about to get married. Before making the appointment Mr Williams asked her if she intended '...to stay very long', by which he meant how soon did she plan to have children. Clearly marriage in itself was not regarded as barrier to promotion, but motherhood was. Dorothy ends her account of this phase of her labour market participation with the blunt-sounding statement: 'And then I left to have Jane, my first child'. The very bluntness of this statement, made with no explanatory additions, demonstrates Dorothy's acceptance of the fact that she would not be able to combine her work as a private secretary with child-care.

#### Planning to return to the labour market

Later in the interview, when Dorothy describes her plans to return to the labour market, she explains that she felt it would be easier to combine child-care with teaching than with secretarial work:.

Dorothy: I always said I would never be a secretary again until my children had both left school, because it's a very demanding occupation. If you can't give it that, then it's not worth doing it. I wouldn't say that teaching isn't demanding but it can more easily be fitted in with home life. You can do some of the work necessary for teaching, like marking and preparation, at home. But when you are a secretary, everything has to be done in the office. Your boss always expects you to be helpful and cheerful. Although he might be considerate, he doesn't expect you to have too many problems. I think you've got to be willing to be that kind of person, to shut your home life off and also, if it's needed, to give extra time in the evenings.

EB: Did you do that when you were first married - give extra time in the evenings?

Dorothy: Oh yes. That was easier, just between the two of you. You're both independent people, aren't you? We respected each other's job. If there was overtime to be worked we both accepted it had to be done. But with a family, everything has to be organised all the time. You can't do overtime at the drop of a hat, which is how a secretary's overtime tends to come. Things usually crop up unexpectedly.

In common with all the teachers in the study, Dorothy found the conditions of part-time teaching in a college of further education more amenable to integration with her child-care responsibilities than full-time office work, particularly at the level of private secretary.

After her marriage and while she was still in full-time employment as a private secretary, Dorothy had given some thought to how she might at some time in the future combine paid employment with the care of young children. She describes how she met one of the other teachers in the study, Christine Evans, '...quite by chance'. Christine was then a student on an evening class course that would give her an RSA teaching qualification in typing. Dorothy joined the course in its second year since she thought it would be a useful qualification in the future. She planned to have children and thought that part-time teaching would 'fit in' with her anticipated domestic commitments more readily than secretarial work. She had been persuaded that it would be possible for her to pass the examination even though she had missed the first year of the course. She failed the examination but made some useful contacts while she was on the course. As she puts it:

I didn't pass the exam. I didn't even finish the theory paper. But I got to know the Head of Department and my typing teacher, Mrs Yeo, could see that my typing was of a high standard even though I wasn't very good at theory. This all happened before I had my first baby.



### Returning to the labour market

Dorothy's eventual move back into paid employment was not made on her own initiative. She explains:

Then quite a long time later I was at home having lunch and feeding Jane when Mrs Yeo knocked at the door and asked me if I'd like to do some evening class teaching. I said 'Don't be ridiculous' and she said 'It's only Stage One [typing]; I'm sure you could do it.' Contacts are important aren't they? I suppose they were looking for part-time teachers because the full-time teachers didn't want to do evening class work. At any rate, I eventually said that I would do it if Mrs Yeo thought I was capable. I really enjoyed those evening classes. I did it for several years and eventually worked my way up to do Stage Three work. I got good examination results.

Having worked her way up the office hierarchy from office junior to private secretary, Dorothy has here described the some of the stages of the second hierarchy through which she and the other teachers in the study had to climb.

Status in teaching in this setting is measured mainly on three criteria. One is the level of the subject being taught. In this particular case, typing, there are three levels or stages available in the RSA examination system. Stage One typing is the qualification that all beginners aim at. All students on the full-time General Secretarial courses would be expected to achieve this standard by the end of their course; some would be encouraged to reach Stage Two. The highest level, Stage Three, is regarded as an advanced qualification. Students on two-year full-time courses would aim at this qualification although Stage Two would be regarded as a perfectly acceptable achievement. The 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students were encouraged to aim for Stage Three but in

the following year the course goal in typing was 'capped' at Stage Two. When Dorothy says that she eventually worked her way up to teach Stage Three work in typing, she is indicating one of the marks of her developing status as a teacher.

The second criterion on which status is measured is the type of course to which the subject is taught. Dorothy has indicated that she was probably given this work to do with evening class courses because full-time teachers 'didn't want to do evening class work'. In general more status is attached to teaching students on full-time courses than students on part-time courses, particularly evening class courses. So Dorothy was teaching high status work but to students on relatively low status courses. When I met her in 1985 she had begun to include some day-time classes in her teaching programme.

The third criterion on which status as a teacher is measured is that of the examination results achieved by students. This is not a feature of life unique to the secretarial section but one which pervades the whole institution. When Dorothy says 'I got good examination results' she is measuring herself against an institutionally recognised means of assessing a teacher's competence.

Dorothy reflects on this period when she taught evening class students successfully but had had little training as a teacher. She says:

I don't think I was a good teacher in those days. I was a good adviser. I was good; conscientious about marking work. I



seemed to be able to explain; I communicate well with people. That must have been a natural gift. And I have loads of patience. So we got through by trial and error, loads of patience and hard-working students.

She recognises the importance of what she describes as her 'natural' gifts, but became increasingly aware of her lack of teacher qualifications, particularly when she was asked to teach students on Link courses. Students on Link courses are released from local schools to attend college for a day or part of a day each week. It was her encounter with these younger students that made Dorothy feel that she needed formal training. By this time the college was running RSA teacher training courses in the various office skills subjects, but they were held in the evening and clashed with Dorothy's own teaching commitments to evening classes. She was therefore encouraged by the Head of Department to attend a Certificate of Education course at a nearby polytechnic. The course lasted for two years. There was a period of one month's block release in the middle of the course, but apart from that the course involved attendance on one day a week.

When I met Dorothy she had completed her Certificate of Education course but was then struggling to gain an additional RSA diploma qualification in the teaching of Office Procedures. This was an evening class course run by Riverbank College on one evening each week. Dorothy was combining attendance on this course with just over eleven hours of teaching done on a part-time basis. She was finding the pressures difficult to cope with. Having had some teacher training she recognised the value of it both for herself and her students. She said:

I think you need teacher training of some description and I think a minimum of a year. I don't think these short courses that instructors can go on can give them enough. I don't think it's fair to students. I mean I don't think it was fair when you look back. I did my best and my students did quite well, but I still think they could have learned a lot more easily.

However, Dorothy was finding difficulty in combining over eleven hours of part-time teaching with attendance on the RSA course, particularly since she was undertaking a period of teaching practice as part of the course requirements. She admitted that she was already falling behind with her assignments for the RSA course and had not attended the class for three weeks.

Dorothy was poised on the brink of becoming a full-time teacher. Many of the comments she made in interview reveal the ambivalent feelings she has at this stage. The pressure of combining attendance on a part-time teacher training course with part-time teaching made her so tired that she says she 'couldn't take in what was happening on the course.' However, she appreciates the value of teacher qualifications and says:

I feel now that I have a qualification I have an insight into teaching. I have something to call upon which I didn't have before. And I've enjoyed taking the TOPS students [as part of her teaching practice]. I didn't think I'd be able to cope but I don't think it went down too badly and it's broadened my experience.

I then asked her if she was looking forward to becoming a full-time teacher. She said:

I don't know. Full-time teaching. I think sometimes whether I'm the right person. When it's all over [the RSA course] I'll have to think about that carefully.



Many of Dorothy's anxieties about re-entering the labour market are repeated in interviews with the other teachers in the study. There are two key points in the process of re-entry. The first occurs at the initial point of re-entry. The common problem here is that of balancing both the total number hours of work and the phasing of those hours so as to coincide with child-care commitments. The second key point occurs at the time when teachers transfer from working part-time to full-time.

As a final question I asked her if it was possible to say whether or not she preferred teaching to being a secretary. She answered:

I prefer teaching within my limits to being a secretary. But sometimes when you're asked to branch out, which if you want to expand you sometimes are asked to do, that panics and frightens me because I feel the responsibility. It's not you that's suffering if you haven't got it just right, it's students who suffer and that frightens me a little bit. How ambitious do you get?

Dorothy's rhetorical question about ambition leads into a description of the second phase of Marianna's work history. When the study began, Marianna had worked her way up through every level of the teaching hierarchy in further education from part-time teacher to senior lecturer and, finally, to the administrative level of Head of the Department of Business Studies.

#### MARIANNA

When Marianna left school she first worked as a clerk probationer in County Hall. She soon realised that if she was to progress to become 'somebody's secretary', as she put it, within a time scale that she

found acceptable then she would have to look for employment outside the ponderous bureaucratic machinery of County Hall. So she applied for and got the job of secretary to the Chief Horticultural Officer in the local Ministry of Agriculture office.

#### The end of Phase One

Marianna remained in this post for seven years, during which time she married. Marianna then began a period of enforced mobility as she followed her husband from one job to another. On his first move to a new job in a neighbouring county Marianna decided not to look for paid employment because she thought, as a farm manager's wife, she would have 'lots to do'. As things turned out she became bored because she 'didn't have anything to do at all'.

She found work as a private secretary to a chartered accountant and describes this as 'great fun' which she 'really enjoyed'. However, she had to give up this work in order to follow her husband again when he moved into a new job in a different county. By the time they made this move Marianna was pregnant. She had three children and did not look for paid employment again until her youngest child was four and a half years old.

#### Planning to return to the labour market

Unlike Dorothy, Marianna made no clear plans for her eventual return to the labour market. When she did return it was as a teacher, but her



readiness for this move came as a result of a purely fortuitous experience in the past.

During the first phase of her work history, while Marianna was working full-time as a secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, she did a little part-time teaching of shorthand and typing in an Evening Institute in a small town to the west of the county town. This early introduction to teaching was not planned. She took the teaching over from a colleague in the Ministry of Agriculture who was leaving the area and who asked Marianna if she would like to do the work. Although she had no experience of teaching in an educational institution before this time, she had helped to train people in the typing pool at County Hall in her spare time. She continued with the Evening Institute work for about three years before leaving the area to follow her husband when his new job took him into a neighbouring county. Marianna herself comments on the fortuitous nature of her introduction to teaching:

So I had a bit of experience of teaching but that was quite by accident. They were so desperate and I was the only one they knew who could do shorthand and typing and who lived in that area.

#### Returning to the labour market

Unlike Dorothy, it was Marianna herself who took the initiative to return to the labour market by writing to a nearby college of further education to ask if they needed any part-time teachers for evening classes. She taught there for about three hours a week for just over two years when, again, she had to move because her husband moved

further east, towards London, where he got a better farm manager's job. Once settled there, Marianna wrote to two neighbouring colleges and eventually got a job at one of them as a part-time teacher. While she was at this college she took the RSA Typing Teachers Diploma since there it was compulsory for part-time teachers who wanted to be considered for full-time posts to have this qualification. At this stage Marianna was doing eighteen hours part-time teaching in the evening. She says:

I was beginning to like the idea of being able to earn some money, especially as it was in the evening when the kids were in bed. I could buy things like an expensive sewing machine, things you can't afford when you have three small children.

She also makes it clear that she enjoyed the work; it was not a simple matter of economics. She says she 'loved working at the college'. When her husband's next change of job meant a move back to the south-west, this time near West Port, Marianna says she 'really didn't want to come back.'

Many of Marianna's comments reveal her willingness to take on a challenge. Before the move to West Port she had also begun to teach during the day in a nearby secondary school while her youngest child was in kindergarten. She says:

That's when I first started teaching Office Practice, not shorthand and typing. I'd never heard of a syllabus in Office Practice and when I asked what it was I was told 'It's just what goes on in offices'. So I just had to make up the syllabus.

With three young children, a heavy teaching commitment in two quite different educational institutions and the challenge of making up a



syllabus in an unknown subject Marianna says that it was at this stage that she 'really knew' that she wanted to continue with teaching.

When Marianna and her husband returned to the south-west it was in the middle of the academic year, so she was unable to obtain any part-time teaching. She obtained a post as a private secretary to the managing director of a small electrical firm in West Port but gave it up willingly when she was later given the chance to do about fourteen hours part-time teaching a week at Riverbank Technical College. By this time her children were in private schools and as she says 'I needed the money.'

At this stage she was at a career point similar to that of Dorothy when I interviewed her as part of the study. Both were doing a substantial amount of part-time teaching and the next logical step would be to actively seek or take up the offer of a full-time post. Almost all of the teachers in the study describe the transition from part-time to full-time work as a difficult period. The advantage of part-time work is recognised by Marianna when she says 'I felt as a part-timer I could decide how many hours I would teach.' When a full-time vacancy arose at the college and Marianna hesitated about applying for it, she was warned by the Principal that whoever got the full-time post would take over most of the work that she had been doing as a part-timer. It was this statement combined with the fact that she needed to maintain her income in order to help to pay her children's school fees that made Marianna decide to apply for the post.

In those days, the late 1960s, the lowest rung of the ladder for full-time teachers in further education was Assistant Lecturer. Marianna was initially appointed at this grade but after two years she successfully applied for an internal promotion to Lecturer Grade I, the next rung of the ladder. At this stage Marianna's motivation was a combination of her own growing enthusiasm for teaching and the need to make a contribution to the payment of her children's school fees. In 1970 she began a two-year part-time course at a nearby polytechnic. This was the same Technical Teachers' Certificate of Education that Dorothy was to take later.

It was during this period that Marianna's marriage broke up. Describing the polytechnic course, she says:

That lasted for two years and it was in the middle of all that that my marriage broke up. I think my husband began to feel that I was getting too deeply into teaching and because it was....it's difficult to describe [...]. Looking back, I think from his point of view it must have seemed my whole life revolved round this teaching. I had always been interested in farming and in his career and suddenly I was no longer so interested because I had things to do of my own. I was really into education [...] Yes, looking back this is probably where we started parting company. Other things obviously came into it, but I think I was changing. I became a different person.

She adds a little later 'When I became full-time at college and things began to move for me, that's when things changed.'

Marianna describes the difficult financial situation in which she was left after the divorce. She says:

I didn't get maintenance, because it was considered I was too well-paid as a Lecturer Grade I. I got maintenance for the kids, but not for me. We'd always lived in farmhouses, so I



had no house. We'd always sent our kids to private schools so I had no money. So I had to work. I'd just enough money for a deposit on a carpet (laughs). I won't go into any details, but it was pretty traumatic and I really did not know what to do. I was very hard up and I had three kids [...]. I had no furniture and virtually everything I got for the house I had to get on credit. So I just had to work.

This traumatic turn of events changed Marianna's way of looking at teaching. It now became something she had to do in order to survive. As she says, 'I wasn't in teaching for a short term, but I was in it for life because I would have to support myself.' Shortly after her divorce, Marianna was promoted to Lecturer Grade II. This post combined teaching with responsibility for the administration of the secretarial section.

Marianna then gives an account of how she worked up from Lecturer Grade II to Senior Lecturer and eventually, Head of Department. These promotions did not just fall into her lap. At the Lecturer Grade II and Senior Lecturer points, she had been applying for similar posts in other colleges before being promoted to those levels in Riverbank College. She says she felt like a 'free agent' and more able to move wherever she could find a job that she liked because by this stage her children were almost grown up and independent. When she had been at the Lecturer Grade II level for about five years she kept asking the Principal and the Head of Department if she would ever be promoted to Senior Lecturer. She applied for a post in Bournemouth at that level. She says:

I was beginning to think I'm not doing this for ever. I thought I can't be a Lecturer Grade II for the rest of my life. So I applied for this post at Bournemouth and something

just told me not to take it. Within a month of refusing it I was promoted to Senior Lecturer here.

Not very long after this promotion she applied for a post as Head of Department in a college in the Reading area, but did not even get an interview. At this stage she was torn between her reluctance to stay in Riverbank College unless she were promoted and her reluctance to move. She says:

I wasn't sure that I wanted to move. I would probably have been lonely if I had moved; 49 is quite old to go right away on your own. So, I thought I'm certainly not staying as a Senior Lecturer until I'm 60, I couldn't possibly do that.

In 1978 she began a part-time BEd course in Educational Management at the same polytechnic where she had earlier taken her Technical Teachers Certificate in Education. She says that she embarked on the course thinking that she might not see it through to the end, but feeling the need to 'do something'.

At about the same time the Head of Department became ill and Marianna took on extra administrative work to help him out. In the following May he gave notice that he would be leaving at Christmas. When the job was advertised Marianna applied and by the time interviews took place she knew that she had been awarded an upper second on her BEd course. Her own words best describe the final step up to becoming Head of Department. She says:

The rest is history. They advertised and I got through the first interview. That was interesting in that they interviewed six men and me. On the short list there was one other man who had a doctorate. He didn't turn up for the



second interview, so there was only me. I always say to the Principal 'You only got me by default'.

I now turn to the other two full-time teachers whose work history is described here. When the study began they were both Lecturers Grade I. First, Jenny.

#### JENNY

Jenny's route into teaching was rather more circuitous than that of any of the other teachers in the study. Like Marianna, she had a period of enforced mobility when she gave up a secretarial job that she enjoyed in order to follow her husband when he changed jobs. She gave up paid employment as a secretary when she was pregnant and did not contemplate returning to the labour market until her family was complete after the birth of her second child.

#### Planning to return to the labour market

Jenny's plans to return to the labour market were driven partly by economics and partly by her need for intellectual and social stimulation. As she puts it:

After I had my second baby I decided I needed to earn some money and besides that I knew I would go spare if I stayed at home all the time.

The way in which Jenny gradually worked her way back into the labour market illustrates very clearly how the main factor in her decision-making process was the age of her children.

### Returning to the labour market

Jenny's first step back into paid employment consisted of evening work. At this stage her children were not at school. She decided that evening work would enable her to share child-care responsibilities with her husband. She did not choose teaching, but instead trained as a telephonist with the Post Office. She said in interview:

I trained as a telephonist with the Post Office and got an evening job there. That lasted some years. It fitted well with my commitments with the children although it meant my husband and I were saying 'Who are you?' as he came in from work and I went out in the evening. But it helped for a few years.

By her final comment here, '...it helped for a few years', Jenny indicates that her income was a help to the family budget. Her wage was needed for what she and her husband regarded as necessities; it was not 'pin money'.

As the children grew older and were at school for a large part of the day, Jenny felt that she could undertake part-time work during the day and so managed to find a job that she could fit around her child-care responsibilities:

Then I went to West Reach primary school as a clerical assistant because the children were old enough to go to school so it meant I was free, well, free part of the day anyway. So I worked mornings there for a while.

While she was working at this primary school she started to attend evening classes at Riverbank College and took a series of Royal Society of Arts (RSA) examinations that would give her a recognised teacher qualification. Jenny was already preparing for her eventual entry into



teaching, but there was more to it than that. I asked why she decided to take the courses. She hesitated for a long time and then said:

I just felt I wanted to....(very long pause)....study. Talk about getting hooked (laughs). So I took three RSA courses over a period of years. First the Shorthand Teachers' Certificate, then the Typing Teachers' Certificate and then the Office Practice Certificate.

It was during this period of gaining RSA teaching qualifications that Jenny began to teach part-time at Riverbank College. While she was doing the Office Practice course, the third and last of her RSA teaching courses she was asked 'Why don't you get a proper qualification?'. Jenny was stunned and stung by this question, but decided to pursue what she was persuaded were 'higher' qualifications. She says:

Those RSA qualifications are ever so hard to get. The pass rate isn't very high. Anyway I decided to do the Cert.Ed. course at Westward Poly by which time I was here [at Riverbank College] teaching part-time. I'd given up my job at the school as a clerical assistant and begun to work here part-time instead. I did the Cert.Ed. on Wednesday so I didn't do any teaching on that day. After that I had a year's break from study and then did the B.Ed. at Westward Poly which took up two evenings a week for three years. I found it hard going. Three years. I started that course at the same time as I became a full-time teacher here. It was all a bit much really.

Jenny's first full-time post in the college was as a Lecturer Grade I, which at the time was the lowest pay scale for teachers in the further education sector. Her children were at secondary school and she was then 40 years old.

I now turn to Christine, the second full-time teacher whose work history is considered in detail. Like Dorothy, after leaving school she worked for ABC and worked her way up from office junior to private secretary. She only gave up full-time employment with ABC when she became pregnant.

#### CHRISTINE

Like Dorothy, Christine attended the local grammar school. After taking GCE 'O' level examinations she left school at 16 and immediately began work as an office junior with ABC. Again like Dorothy, she worked her way up the office hierarchy as it exists for women until she was appointed to the post of private secretary

#### The end of Phase One

Christine relinquished the post of private secretary, not on marriage, but when she became pregnant. In interview Christine declared that initially she had no thought of going back into paid employment until her children were at school. Then she describes the mixture of pleasure and boredom that she experienced in being at home all day with two small children:

I must admit I thought I would be the world's most marvellous mother and I thought it would all be marvellous. But I did get a bit fed up, seeing the same four walls and my main topic of conversation was how white were the nappies and, you know, how many ounces the babies had put on. I enjoyed it all but it wasn't enough.



It was at this stage that Christine was persuaded by a friend to attend an evening class at Rivertown Technical College. The class led to an RSA teaching qualification in typing. At this point Christine had no intention of teaching or of returning to the labour market in the near future. Her friend told her that the class was low in numbers and would be closed unless more people joined. Christine went along partly to help to keep the class numbers up but also because she felt she 'ought to do something'. She says of the experience:

I can't say I'd forgotten how to type, but I practically had to learn how to type again. I enjoyed being in a class. I began to feel a person again, just being there, something to do. I found I quite looked forward to going [...] It opened my eyes to a new world and I thoroughly enjoyed it [...] I realised that learning could be quite enjoyable and it was different from what I was doing at home. I used to come home, write the essays and feel quite chuffed with myself.

This new-found pleasure in learning is a theme that is repeated in interviews with the mature students in the study. Jenny, too, talked about how she eventually got 'hooked' on learning and took three RSA teaching certificates in three years. The course that Christine took had a specifically vocational purpose. However, the satisfaction she derived from attending the course went far beyond the boundaries of instrumentalism. As she says herself, she 'began to feel a person again'.

#### Planning to return to the labour market

Christine was out of the labour market for seven years while her first two children were young. She invited me round to her home one evening

to talk to her and her husband about their shared views on marriage and the domestic division of labour, particularly the way she had integrated paid employment with child-care. This triangular interview provided me with much richer data than interviews with the other teachers in the study on the joint decision-making processes behind the return to paid employment.

At the time of the study Christine and James had three sons; Peter and Matthew were grown up and living away from home and the youngest, Ian, was still at school. Christine explained that they planned to have two children and made the joint decision that she would not return to paid employment until they were at school:

Christine: We married in 1956 when I was working full-time at ABC as a secretary. In 1961 Peter was born. We decided to have two children fairly close together because I was an only child and there had been such a big gap between James and his sister that he had felt like an only child. So we then had Matthew in 1963. Then we both decided that for the sake of the children I would not work until they were both at school. We had decided that it was more important for me to be at home with the two children, even if it meant being poor. So they were both at school before I went out to work and then it was very much part-time.

EB: Could I just ask James what he felt about that? Was it a joint agreement?

James: Oh yes. It was an amicable agreement. It wasn't me laying down the law. I fully approved of the idea and I think it was correct. Certainly until they both were at school. When Christine didn't have to be at home all the time with the children then it seemed to be a good idea for her to do some work if that was what she wanted to do. Again, it wasn't forced on her but we had a mutual understanding that if Christine worked it would bolster the income.



During the interview they had both spoken about the 'pinching and scraping' that had occurred during the years when Christine was out of the labour market. I asked them to describe those years. Christine began:

That was when we had caravan holidays (laughs). Yes, I can remember walking along the street and thinking 'I hope the cornflakes last until tomorrow', that sort of thing. But we always paid the mortgage and our bills. And for years I only had one best jumper and one best skirt that I would have to wear if we went out. That was all I had. I did find that because of circumstances I was always the one that did without. James is not one for dressing up but he had to be reasonably dressed to go to work and the children had to have clothes because they were growing, so if anybody did without it was me. So obviously it was of benefit to me if I went out to work. I'm not over-fond of clothes, but I didn't like being quite as poor as that, having to wear the same thing everywhere.

James agreed that it had been difficult to manage financially when Christine was not in paid employment. He added:

We had to rely on state benefits to compensate for our lack of income (laughs). We had to plan that out pretty carefully really. We had a mortgage. We paid about £2,700 for this property (laughs). Thank goodness for inflation.

#### Returning to the labour market

As Christine has already explained, she did not return to paid employment until the younger of her first two sons, Matthew, began school in 1967. This return was not exactly planned by her. She had become known in the Department of Business Studies simply by having followed the RSA course for teachers of typing. Very much as Dorothy did, Christine made valuable 'contacts' while she was a student on the course although at the time she had no plans to become a teacher. She

describes how she was given the opportunity to return to paid employment as a part-time teacher:

I was pushing the children out in a pram and I just happened to meet someone from the college who asked me if I'd be willing to teach an evening class and it just happened to fit in, just as though it was tailor made. But very much part-time. I did part-time for years.

About four years after she returned to the labour market, Christine and James decided to have a third child. She explains their reasons:

Then when Peter was ten and Matthew was eight, I was perfectly happy with the two boys but James had always wanted a daughter and wanted to adopt a child, but I couldn't do that. To be honest, I felt I'd resent it if James made a lot of the adopted child, so I agreed to have another child. We even tried a method that would produce a daughter and it didn't work. That was 1971.

After the birth of her third child, Christine did not give up her work as a teacher for very long. By this time her mother was a widow and was happy to take over some of Christine's child-care responsibilities. She explains:

I went back to work almost straight away because Mr Bartaby [Head of Department] came knocking at the door to ask me if I'd go back and do evening classes. I used to breast feed the baby and go off. At this point my father had died and my mother was willing to have the baby for an afternoon if I wanted to do an afternoon class. So I must admit I did a bit of work when Ian was small although I didn't when the other two were small. But it was only day-release classes and evening classes, nothing that really affected the child.

EB: Still only part-time?

Christine: Yes. We had always thought that the children's welfare is more important than money. That was when they were young. Now they're older, I think Ian quite appreciates it now because it makes him feel independent. My mother used to



come up in the afternoon so that he never came into an empty house, but now he enjoys coming in and making himself something to eat.

It is interesting to note that after the birth of her third son, Christine returned to part-time work more quickly than she did after the birth of the first two. This was made possible since her mother was able to help with child-care and Christine was able to teach at times that were convenient for her. As she says, she did 'nothing that really affected the child'. Christine taught six to eight hours a week (between three and four tenths of a full-time teaching programme) until 1971, when her youngest son was ten years old.

At about this time she had to make the difficult decision about whether or not to undertake full-time work. As we have seen, Dorothy was at this stage when she was interviewed as part of the study and was anxious about her ability to take on a full-time post. A further anxiety expressed by Marianna when she was at this stage centred around the loss of choice and flexibility on taking up a full-time post. Christine went through an intermediate stage between being a part-time and a full-time teacher. She explains:

In 1981 I had become an Associate Lecturer teaching fifteen hours a week in 1981. And then there was a big discussion about me going full-time. Mr Bartaby had said there was a job going and if I applied it would be mine, he was sure. I came home and discussed it with James. He said it was entirely my decision. If it would worry me then I was not to do it, but if I wanted to do it then that was fine. I think James would still say tomorrow that if I came home crying about a lesson like some do he would say 'Pack it up and we'll be poor again'. I'll give James that; happiness is the main thing.

In a later interview Christine explains in some more detail how she came to make the transition from being an Associate Lecturer to a full-timer. The conditions of work of Associate Lecturers combined the flexibility of part-time work with some, but not all, of the security of full-time work. Christine says that being an Associate Lecturer was exactly what she wanted. She was guaranteed up to 15 hours of teaching a week throughout the college year, whereas the full-time teaching load in the lowest of the lecturer grades was 22 hours a week. She says:

If I could have stayed an Associate Lecturer, teaching about 15 hours a week for the rest of my time there [Riverbank College] then I think I would have stayed at that grade because the seven hours a week more made it harder going and also you didn't have the choice. As a part-timer I'd been able to say well, I'd rather not teach on Wednesday morning because that's when I do the shopping or some such mediocre thing. Even as an Associate Lecturer I still had some choice.

Choices of this kind are denied to full-timers, but advancement to a full-time post was 'sold' to Christine on the basis of the security of employment it brought with it. The Head of Department said to her:

Well, if the crunch comes and redundancies are made, obviously it will be part-timers first and associate lecturers next.

His comments made Christine 'weigh it all up' and decide what she 'really wanted from life'. Neither she nor her husband wanted any more children. The extra money she had brought into the family budget had enabled them to afford such luxuries as foreign travel and eating out, but she added, 'there was a bit more behind it than that'. She then went on to talk about the pleasure she finds in having 'a separate life' and describes some of the college social activities such as



badminton, rambling and theatre visits that she participates in regularly. James joins in some of these activities but Christine comments that it has all changed her life more than it has that of anyone else in the family.

At this stage in the life cycle, when her family was complete and her youngest son was an increasingly independent teenager, Christine was in a position to strike a different balance between paid and unpaid employment. The money she earned as a full-time teacher helped to improve the general quality of family life. Additionally, she herself began to enjoy the social activities that were part of the social life of the college.

### CONCLUSION

Although the data have been presented as individual stories, they are much more than this. Dex argues that:

Women's work histories provide more than a collection of individual profiles. Although work histories are an individual's data, so to speak, the experience of individuals have arisen through an interactive process of structures and individuals and they must therefore provide insight into at least both sides of this interactive process (Dex, 1984:5).

While the social relations of capitalist patriarchy do not determine women's actions at the micro-sociological level they nevertheless have to be recognised as the larger framework of possibilities within which women structure their lives. At this level of analysis, it is socialist feminist theory that provides the most

satisfactory basis for an understanding of the structural position of women in society. Within this theoretical framework analytical regard is given to the competing demands on women's labour power both between the private sphere and the public sphere.

The four work histories presented in this chapter demonstrate this quite clearly. Before they were married and had children, all four women were ambitious and accumulated the necessary educational credentials to enable them to progress to the level of private secretary. This is the 'initial work' phase, the first peak in the 'M' profile, identified by Dex (1984). During this phase there is little to distinguish women's attitudes to paid employment from that of men. It is their subsequent responsibility for child-care that largely marks out the difference between women's employment patterns and those of the majority of men. All the teachers in the study who had children repeated the same point, that the responsibility they felt for their children took priority over other concerns. The data collected from interviews with Christine and James make clear the decision-making processes that are hidden behind overt actions. When their children were young, adequacy of child-care was more important to both of them than the extra income that might have been derived from Christine's participation in the labour market. As a consequence of these joint decisions Christine did not become a full-time teacher until 1981 when her youngest son was ten years old and she was 45.



In the next chapter I move closer to the core of the study and turn to analysis at the institutional level. Close proximity between course provision in colleges of further education and the skill needs of the labour market is a taken-for-granted feature of institutional structures and day-to-day life. Since course provision and labour market needs are so closely associated, the segmented and hierarchical structures of the latter are reflected in the former. Teaching and learning in the research setting cannot be fully understood without some explanation of the further education sector as a whole and some description of the institution within which these activities take place.

## CHAPTER FIVE

FURTHER EDUCATION:

WOMEN IN THEIR PLACE



In this chapter I first define what is meant by further education. This is followed by a brief account of the development of the further education sector as a whole since the 1944 Education Act. Two distinct phases can be detected in this development. The first phase, from 1944 to the early 1970s, could be described as one of optimism and expansion. The second phase, from the early 1970s to the present, stands in stark contrast as a period of retrenchment and increasing subordination to central control. During this second phase Riverbank College was designated a tertiary college as part of the comprehensive reorganisation of secondary education in West Port in 1973. As it then found expression locally, the tertiary college principle sits rather uncomfortably alongside the 'new vocationalism' of centralised directives and initiatives. I therefore give some attention to the tertiary college concept in this chapter.

The emphasis in this account of the post-war developments in further education will be on the location of female students within the sector. In feminist analyses of the position of women in educational institutions, both in the past and the present, the dominant stress has been on exposing the exclusionary mechanisms operating against female students. Institutional exclusion is not the problem in this educational setting. I have already indicated that in Riverbank College, as in further education colleges nationally, female students outnumber male students. The argument to be developed in this chapter is that female

students are not denied access to colleges of further education since, on the whole, their presence does not challenge areas of male dominance.

Most women in most colleges of further education are to be found on vocational courses which reflect the gender divisions of the labour market. In such circumstances, where women are not competing with men either for educational credentials or eventual employment, their presence is not a source of conflict. So long as they remain within the boundaries of 'women's work', women find easy access to courses in colleges of further education.

#### FURTHER EDUCATION

I follow Cantor and Roberts (1972:287) in their use of 'further education' as a generic title to describe all forms of post-compulsory education, except that provided in sixth-forms of schools, sixth-form colleges and by universities. The further education sector as a whole therefore includes a wide variety of institutions: polytechnics, colleges (or institutes) of higher education, colleges of further education, evening institutes and adult education centres. Some of these institutions, for example colleges of art and colleges of agriculture, have a specialist vocational function. Most, however, provide a wide variety of vocational courses which qualify students for entry into a correspondingly wide variety of occupations.

One of the major dividing lines within the sector is between non-advanced further education (NAFE) and advanced further education (AFE).



This status boundary is defined by the level of educational provision, measured by the qualification that students are awarded at the end of their course. Courses are classified as non-advanced up to and including GCE 'A' level or its equivalent, for example Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) National Certificates and Diplomas. Courses above this level are classified as advanced. Although there is mixed-level provision in many colleges, the majority can be clearly identified as standing on one side or other of the advanced/non-advanced dividing line. The majority of the courses at Riverbank College are classified as non-advanced.

Most of the official discourse on further education rests on the employment of functionalist theory and closely related arguments of the human capital variety. In the reconstructionist and expansionist decades of the 1950s and 1960s it was argued that rapid technological expansion created changes in the occupational structure which then needed an adequate supply of appropriately trained workers. A series of official reports called on the further education sector to supply that need (Ministry of Education, 1956 and 1958; DES, 1964). These reports will be examined in some detail later in the chapter. In general, their common argument was that investment in training would benefit the individual, industry and commerce and, ultimately, the nation as a whole.

In the more recent period of industrial decline it is now argued that the needs of industry have changed. The new technology demands the development of new skills but, more importantly, workers must be

adaptable and flexible and so able to meet future changes. New training schemes are seen as filling what has now been called the 'skills gap' which exists between school-leavers or the older unemployed and the skill requirements of the labour market. While economic conditions in Britain have changed radically since the 1950s and 1960s, the basic argument of official reports and recent interventions into NAFE by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) remains the same; a close, symbiotic relationship between the further education sector and the economy is assumed to exist and is unproblematically taken for granted.

I shall now explore the post-war development of the further education sector in more detail. This development is divided into two phases. The first runs from the 1944 Education Act to the early 1970s. Some commentators (CCCS, 1981; Finch, 1984) make 1972 the dividing line between the two phases since this was the date of the publication of a White Paper with what most commentators now regard as the unintentionally ironic title of 'A Framework for Expansion'. Although it can be useful to try to establish such a clear watershed I feel that there can be no absolutely clear dividing line between the two phases and prefer to leave the date vaguely expressed as the early 1970s. The second phase then runs from the early 1970s to the present.

#### FURTHER EDUCATION: 1944 TO THE EARLY 1970s

The 1944 Education Act is described by Cantor and Roberts (1972:2) as 'a landmark in the history of further education'. The Act placed upon every local education authority (LEA) a statutory duty to provide what were



described within the Act as 'adequate facilities' for further education in its area. Within the Act, further education was defined as:

(a) full-time and part-time education for persons over compulsory school age and

(b) leisure-time occupation, in such organised cultural training and recreative activities as are suited to their requirements, for any persons over compulsory school age who are willing and able to profit by the facilities provided for that purpose (Section 41).

Although this definition in itself did very little more than describe provision as it already existed in many areas, the significant change for the further education sector was that a statutory duty was placed on LEAs to make such provision. Each LEA was asked to submit to the Ministry of Education a development plan for further education within its area, but the absence of any form of major regional or national planning within the further education sector gave rise to a largely unco-ordinated development, described by Cantor and Roberts (1972:3) as a 'patchwork-quilt'.

An important feature of the 1944 Act was the attempt made within its provisions for the structural rationalisation of earlier unco-ordinated developments in the public education system as a whole. Under the provisions of the Act, further education was envisaged as the third in a sequence of consecutive phases from primary to secondary and then into the post-compulsory phase. The 1944 Education Act stated that:

The statutory system of public education shall be organised in three progressive stages to be known as primary education, secondary education and further education; and it shall be the duty of the local education authority for every area, so far as their powers extend, to contribute towards

the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient education throughout those stages shall be available to meet the needs of the population of their area (Section 7).

Thus a temporal, end-on, association between the primary, secondary and further education sectors was established.

The further education sector has not developed in isolation from the primary and secondary sectors of the educational system. Since 1944 the general tendency has been for forms of learning which are classified as 'education' to be located in the primary and secondary sectors and forms of learning which are classified as 'training' to be located within the further education sector. Thus distinctions between education and training have tended to become institutionalised.

The period between the 1944 Education Act and the early 1970s is often regarded somewhat nostalgically by educationalists as one of expansion and optimism. Looked at in retrospect, it was a period of apparently unanimous conviction that education was a universally valuable commodity. Politicians and educationalists agreed that investment in education could benefit both individuals and society as a whole. This agreement was sustained by liberal philosophical and political idealism and its sociological counterpart, structural functionalism. It is now commonplace (CCCS, 1981) to regard this idealism as being politically naive in its implicit acceptance of a consensual view of society and its blindness to any conflict of interests and values. What is not so commonplace is a recognition of the



fact that this confidence in and optimism about the ameliorative capacity of education had different effects on different sectors of the public education system.

The general trend was that the compulsory years of schooling came to be regarded as a period of time when emphasis should be placed on the development of the individual child. Even here, however, there were distinctions between the primary and secondary phases of compulsory education. Child-centred education came to be unproblematically accepted as a basic element in the philosophy of pre-school and primary school education. In secondary schools the issue was more complex. The early years of secondary schooling have readily been regarded as being similar to primary schooling in their orientation towards the needs of the individual child. The educational arguments used to support the development of middle schools are based on the desire to delay for as long as possible the break between primary school pedagogy and the subject-centred, specialist pedagogy of the secondary school (Hargreaves, 1986). In the public education system in England and Wales the customary dividing line between general, child-centred education and more specialised education which takes its shape from students' anticipated adult roles occurs at 13+. It is worth noting that sociological studies of secondary schools have tended to concentrate on students in the 14 to 16 age group. This is where problems of student rebellion, non-conformity and rejection assume such a high degree of intensity that they cannot be ignored. It is also worth noting that it is at the 13+ stage that gender divisions in students' curricular

choices become an obvious educational problem (Pratt, Bloomfield and Seale, 1984; Riddell, 1988).

In contrast to these trends in the compulsory years of schooling, the further education sector of the post-compulsory years came to be regarded as a legitimate arena for specialised, vocational education. Post-war expansion of the further education sector was largely based on its assumed capacity to provide all levels of the labour market with appropriately skilled and trained workers.

Cantor and Roberts (1972) begin their account of further education since 1944 with a chapter entitled 'The explosion of further education'. The years between 1944 and the early 1970s saw a dramatic expansion in the sector. The number of students more than doubled from 1,595,000 to just over 4,000,000 and the number of full-time teaching staff leapt from under 5,000 to over 76,000 (Cantor and Roberts, 1986:3). This 'explosion' of the further education sector is part of the post-war expansion and diversification within the higher education sector as a whole. In the immediate post-war years higher education in Britain could almost exclusively be defined as university education. More recent expansion and diversification have considerably redefined what is understood by higher education, but status distinctions persist within what has become known as the 'binary' system of higher education (Silver and Brennan, 1988). New forms of technical and vocational education at graduate and post-graduate level have more readily found an institutional home within polytechnics than within the universities.



This has served to emphasise the long-standing assumption of an essential dichotomy between general (or liberal) education and vocational education.

I shall now briefly examine three official reports of the period (Ministry of Education, 1956 and 1958; DES, 1964) specifically relating to the further education sector. The concern in all three reports is for expansion within the further education sector in order to meet the 'manpower' needs of industry. Human capital theory underlies the argument of all three papers but, within this theoretical framework, women are treated as a special case. The three reports are Technical Education (Ministry of Education, 1956), the Carr Report (Ministry of Education, 1958) and the Henniker-Heaton Report (DES, 1964).

### Technical Education

The White Paper, 'Technical Education' begins by quoting from a speech made by the Prime Minister of the time in which he argued for the expansion in scientific and technical education so that Britain would not fall behind in international industrial and commercial developments. The competitive imagery of prizes being awarded to winners is applied here to the international 'race' for economic supremacy:

The prizes will not go to the countries with the largest population. Those with the best systems of education will win (Sir Anthony Eden, quoted in Ministry of Education, 1956: para 1).

An appendix to the paper (Appendix A) sets out available figures on what is described as 'the output of technical manpower' in the USSR and

Western Europe. These figures are compared with their British equivalents. While it is recognised that scientific and technical education in the British university system had considerably expanded in the post-war years, the particular problem faced in this paper was the demand for scientific manpower at all levels, not just at the highest levels.

The publication of this White Paper marks an important stage in the development of the further education sector in that it recognised the need for a coherent framework for the sector as a whole. As its equivalent of the 'ladder' metaphor, used in the inter-war years to describe the route from elementary to secondary schools, the paper introduces a 'pyramid' metaphor to describe the proposed structure of the system of further education. From base to apex, it was intended that the structure should be rationalised, co-ordinated and expanded. It was confidently expected that such a structure would be capable of finely tuning manpower output to the changing needs of the economy.

The plans outlined in the paper involved a large scale programme of capital expenditure. The Government authorised a building programme for technical education to be started within the following five years to the value of £10 million, plus an additional £2 million for equipment. This investment in further education was justified on the grounds of a commonly held interest in the economic success of the nation and the belief that expansion of the education system was 'the key to advance'.



The paper ends with an appeal to meritocratic philosophy and an assumed shared understanding of the situation:

...everyone can now see the value of giving all children, wherever they come from and whatever their financial circumstances, the best possible chance to develop their own talents and contribute to the national well-being (Ministry of Education, 1956: para 159).

The majority of the text of the main body of the paper gives the impression that its expansionist philosophy applies equally to students of both sexes. Apart from one or two lapses there is a careful use throughout of terminology which implies no differentiation between the sexes. It is implied in the text that all 'children', 'pupils', 'boys and girls', 'men and women' are the potential beneficiaries of the proposed investment in further education.

In a somewhat contradictory fashion, the main text includes a section 'The Further Education of Girls' (pp 20-21) in which girls are treated as a special case. It is noted that girls' performance matches that of boys in the 11+ examination and in secondary school examinations but 'once they leave school far fewer girls continue their education'. The only exception to this trend is that 'twice as many girls as boys take full-time courses in further education between the ages of fifteen and eighteen'. No attempt is made to explain these phenomena.

The drift of the argument then swiftly turns in the same paragraph to the fact that 'four times as many boys as girls' are released by their employers to attend day-release courses in colleges of further

education. Although it is fleetingly recognised that it is employers who make decisions about which of their employees they will allow to attend day-release courses, the general tone of this section of the report is one of blaming the victim. It is argued that it is the fault of young women who 'are not making the best use of their talents' or who 'do not see the point of further education once they have got a job'.

The paper asserts that a 'change of attitude is needed'. This change of attitude is demanded, not on the part of employers, but on the part of girls. Following this statement there are three paragraphs (paragraphs 90-92) which clearly demonstrate the ambiguity embedded in the inclusion of girls into 'human capital' arguments. At the same time as girls are persuaded to aim at post-school qualifications, particularly outside such sex-stereotypical areas as nursing and secretarial work, they are also exhorted to regard these as qualifications for an eventual domestic career as a wife and mother. It is argued that:

...such further education is not wasted if a girl marries and exchanges a career outside the home for one within it. Far more often than not the knowledge and experience that comes from studying for a better job help her to build her own family on foundations of common interests and understanding (paragraph 90).

The paper assumes that all girls' hopes are 'naturally' bent on marriage and that the ambition to marry will take precedence over all other ambitions. There is no recognition at all of the possibility that a young woman might want to combine marriage with a career. The only problem here is to persuade girls that 'further education will help and



not hinder the prospects of a happy married life'. This argument bears a striking similarity to the structural functionalist argument of Parsons when he states that:

...it is highly important that the woman's familial role should not be regarded as drastically segregated from the concerns of the society as a whole. The educated woman has important functions as wife and mother, particularly as an influence on her children in backing the schools and impressing on them the importance of education (Parsons, 1959:317).

The White Paper can justifiably be described as a 'landmark' in the post-war development of further education in that the sector was at last regarded as having some degree of national importance and merited firm government financial backing. One of the most important proposals made in the paper was that certain Regional Colleges should be redesignated Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs), providing advanced level courses including post-graduate and research work (paragraphs 65-75). The status of the further education sector was thus considerably enhanced, as it was a short time later in 1966 on the publication of the White Paper 'A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges'. This paper proposed that a number of polytechnics should be established as the main centres for the development of full-time higher education within the further education system. However, it has to be emphasised that this expansionist philosophy did not apply to the expansion of opportunities for female students within the further education sector.

### The Carr Report

The Carr Report (Ministry of Education, 1958), is called 'Training for

Skill: the Recruitment and Training of Young Workers in Industry'. The twin anxieties expressed in this report were how to deal with the expected 'bulge' in the number of fifteen year olds in 1962 and the need to provide industry with an adequate supply of trained workers, especially at the level of craft apprentices. As the 1956 White Paper did, this report examines foreign practice in apprenticeship training (paragraphs 12-17). The main anxiety, though, is not so much centred on foreign competition as on ways in which the British system of training apprentices might be made sufficiently flexible and responsive so as to be able to absorb the expected bulge in the numbers of school leavers. Concern is expressed that the talents of 'the young people who will be leaving school over the next few years' (paragraph 90) should not be wasted by inadequacies in the provision of apprentice training.

The paper includes a short section called 'Opportunities for Girls' (paragraphs 79-82) which begins:

...what we have said earlier in this Report applies to girls as well as to boys.

This statement contradicts the purpose of this section of the report which overtly treats girls as a special case. It is taken for granted that the period of labour market participation for the average girl will be shorter than that for the average boy. Unlike the earlier White Paper (Ministry of Education, 1956), this report does not assume that young women will give up work on marriage, but it is assumed that they will do so in order to undertake child-care responsibilities.



The only positive recommendation for the training of young women is that facilities for such training should be improved in 'those jobs which are traditionally regarded as women's occupations'. The report has already made it clear that training for such work is short and of such a nature that it will enable women to return to work with a minimum of retraining later in their married life should they wish to do so. Again, marriage is assumed to take precedence over adequate training in a young woman's life and training opportunities are limited to preparation for traditionally female occupations.

Even though the central concern of this report is with the problem of attracting more young people into craft apprenticeships, it is clear that these young people are expected to be male. Young school leavers who are female are expected to give a higher priority to their expected domestic role of child-care than to training for participation in the labour market. Any training they do undertake is expected to be well within the recognised boundaries of women's work. Gender segregation in the labour market is not questioned here.

#### The Henniker-Heaton Report

This report (DES, 1964), sets out to examine what steps should be taken to produce an increase in the number of young workers being granted day-release from employment in order to follow courses in further education. It is noted that the number of girls allowed day-release in 1962/3 was 52,000 compared with 209,000 boys, but can only recommend that girls' training be expanded in those industries already offering short periods

of training in traditionally female occupations. In both this and the Carr Report (Ministry of Education, 1958) the boundaries of any expansion in training opportunities for young women are firmly fixed and limited to traditional areas of female employment.

The general tone of this report is one of gloomy pessimism. Rhetorical appeals to meeting the previously assumed mutually compatible needs of the nation, industry and the individual are considerably muted. All the recommendations of the report are made within the boundaries of acknowledged restraints. It is realistically recognised that the extent to which any recommendations will be effective will depend on:

...whether they are acted on in practice at local level by employers, trade unions, education authorities and colleges, and are supported in terms of finance and resources by the Government (paragraph 160).

There is a recognition here that conflicting interests exist and have to be faced. Expansion, in this case of day release opportunities, is not simply a matter of stating a 'need' at national level and assuming a response at local level.

It is scarcely surprising that this somewhat pessimistic report offers little prospect for any improvement in the opportunities for training offered to girls. The report finds 'unacceptable' the view that since girls are unlikely to make a career in industry or commerce, they have little need of training (paragraph 152). Although the report rejects this view, it has to accept that:

...the scope for the development of day release for girls may be limited....by the priorities we have indicated (paragraph 154).



It looks back six years to the Carr Report (Ministry of Education, 1958) and can only recommend that girls' training be expanded in those industries already offering short periods of training in occupational areas traditionally regarded as women's work.

These three reports (Ministry of Education, 1956 and 1958; DES, 1964) are concerned with the need for the further education sector to produce adequate numbers of appropriately trained young people to enter the labour market. However, it is quite clear that these young people are expected to be male. Even when it is acknowledged that young women might participate in training schemes, it is expected that this training will be limited to preparation for traditionally female areas of the labour market and that employment will be temporary until marriage or motherhood. It is not expected that women's involvement in the labour market will be the same as men's assumed lifelong involvement. This expectation shapes the proposals for the provision of training for young women.

#### Female students: a special case

It can be seen that female students occupy an uneasy position within the framework of the human capital arguments that formed the basis of official reports and recommendations for expansion in the further education sector of this period.

This uneasy position is seen even more clearly in the Crowther Report (Ministry of Education, 1959). The report does not deal

exclusively with the further education sector but with the education of a whole age group, fourteen to nineteen, and so discusses educational provision in schools as well as in further education colleges. When discussing curricular provision in schools, the report argues that the school curriculum for boys and girls should be differentiated so as to take into account what is described as a girl's primary and natural interest in marriage:

....the prospect of courtship and marriage should rightly influence the education of the adolescent girl (Ministry of Education, 1959:34).

In the sections of the report which deal with course provision in colleges of further education, emphasis is placed on the close links between such provision and industry; further education is described as 'the handmaiden of industry'. When discussing the inequalities in day release provision in further education the report comments:

This is not, of course, the result of a deliberate decision on anybody's part that girls require or deserve less education than boys. It is partly an accidental consequence of the fact that the concentration of apprenticeship and day release is in the two industries, engineering and building, which are from their nature boys' industries rather than girls'. But it is mainly due to the fundamental difficulty of girls' employment. A girl has a much shorter expectation of uninterrupted working life than a boy. it is this fact, rather than the nature of the work she does or any deliberate sex discrimination, that explains how unlikely she is to get part-time day release (Ministry of Education, 1959:338).

Thus inequalities in the provision of day release courses are partly explained away as being due to accidents of historical developments in the engineering and building industries. An additional major



contributory factor, though, is the expectation that women's participation in the labour market will not be the same as that of men.

In terms of student numbers, state financial backing and enhanced status this was indeed a remarkable period of expansion in the further education sector. However, as far as female students in further education were concerned, nothing changed very much. They were not denied access to colleges. On the contrary, they were made welcome so long as they confined their employment and educational aspirations to areas which were traditionally recognised as women's work.

I now turn to examine developments in the further education sector from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s (the time when the study began). As I indicated earlier in the chapter, this latter phase of retrenchment stands in stark contrast to the earlier, immediately post-war expansionist phase. Somewhat paradoxically, though, developments in further education in these last two decades have been marked by an increasing awareness on the part of policy makers of the problem of gender inequalities.

#### FURTHER EDUCATION: EARLY 1970s TO 1990

The relationship, actual and desired, between the economy and educational provision has become the central focus of educational and political debate during the last two decades. However, the further education sector has remained on the periphery of this controversy since

its function as the 'handmaiden of industry' (Ministry of Education, 1959) has so readily been taken for granted.

The overtly declared aim of vocational courses in colleges of further education is to provide students with skills and qualifications that have an obvious exchange value in the labour market. This overt instrumentalism has, until very recently, distinguished the further education sector as a whole from other sectors of the educational system. The so-called 'Great Debate' of the mid-1970s marked a critical turning point in previously held assumptions and beliefs about the the purposes of education. While most educational institutions have experienced the aftermath of the Great Debate as a disturbing crisis of identity and purpose, the tightening of the bonds between educational provision and the needs of the labour market has vindicated the activities of colleges of further education in their provision of market-led vocational courses.

During the last two decades colleges of further education have experienced a tightening of central control over their activities. Colleges are not unique in this respect; the whole of the educational system has suffered a similar change. What differentiates the further education sector from other sectors of the system is that control is increasingly exercised by the MSC rather than by the Department of Education and Science (DES). The watershed point in this increasing control is marked by the publication of and subsequent debate over the White Paper 'Training for Jobs' (1984). The Paper announced the



government's intention to transfer 25% of the funding of work-related NAFE (WRNAFE) from local authority rate support to the MSC. The WRNAFE initiative gave the MSC purchasing power and control over development plans in NAFE. The bond between course provision in NAFE and the skill demands of employers was thus made closer than ever.

However, it was during this second phase of post-war developments in the further education sector that West Port Technical College was redesignated a tertiary college and renamed Riverbank College as part of secondary reorganisation in West Port. Since the interventions and increasing control exercised by the MSC permeated NAFE nationally during this period, I deal with that development first.

#### The Manpower Services Commission

Once the MSC was established in the early 1970s, its intervention in the provision of education and training spread from training and re-training schemes for adults into a bewildering variety of sometimes ephemeral vocational preparation schemes for unemployed school-leavers. NAFE is thus the sector of the educational system which has progressively become identified as the appropriate locus of training or re-training schemes for mature students and of vigorous attempts to devise vocational preparation schemes for unemployed school-leavers. All these schemes have been beset by the same problem - that of the apparently obdurate nature of sex-stereotypical course choices made by students.

## School-leavers

From its inception the MSC has declared a policy of promoting equal opportunities on its various training schemes for school-leavers. Such policy pronouncements and intentions are very far from what has been achieved in practice. As each batch of schemes has emerged, first the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), then the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and the Technical and Vocational Initiative (TVEI), the same seemingly inevitable pattern of failed intentions develops. The MSC itself was forced to recognise the failure of YOP schemes:

Despite the fact that MSC's policy has been to encourage both boys and girls to consider opportunities in areas traditionally entered by one sex or the other, the Youth Opportunities Programme emerged as a conservative institution. Opportunities on YOP were almost totally segregated into girls' jobs and boys' jobs. YOP simply replicated the patterns found in the wider labour market (MSC, 1983:3).

This admission of failure is followed by an expression of hope for the next scheme:

The Youth Training Scheme sets out to establish new and better ways of training people. It also represents a unique opportunity to break with old patterns of sex role stereotyping (MSC, 1983:3).

However, evidence presented to the Women's National Committee (WNC) soon made it clear that 'old patterns' were more difficult to eradicate than had been anticipated:

YTS has provided virtually equal opportunities in terms of overall places....but there has so far been almost no impact on sex stereotyping (WNC, 1984:22).



Subsequent research (Cockburn, 1987; Wickham, 1986) has confirmed earlier findings that placements on YTS courses replicate the gender divisions of the labour market.

Perhaps in recognition of the obdurate nature of established gender divisions in the labour market, the MSC has made a firm commitment to the eradication of sex-stereotyping in students' choice of options on the more recently developed curricular packages within TVEI. From their inception, a major criterion on which TVEI schemes were assessed was that:

...equal opportunities should be available to young people of both sexes and they should normally be educated together on courses within each project. Care should be taken to avoid sex-stereotyping (MSC, 1984, quoted in James and Young, 1989:15).

Within five months of the first TVEI pilot schemes being set up, Wilce (1984) reported that the initiative had done more to reinforce occupational stereotyping than to reduce it. More recent experience of teachers involved in TVEI (James and Young, 1989) also indicates that the problem of sex-stereotyping within TVEI projects is not amenable to any swift solution.

#### Mature students

The Employment and Training Act (1973) provided for the setting up of the MSC. Of its two executive arms, the Employment Services Division and the Training Services Division, it was the latter which was to be responsible for the Training Opportunities Scheme (TOPS). TOPS programmes provided a wide variety of courses at different levels; they were aimed

at men and women who had been out of full-time education for at least two years and were over 19 years old. After the MSC took responsibility for TOPS courses the numbers of women on them increased from 6,000 in 1972 to 40,881 in 1978. By 1980 women made up 45 per cent of the total number of students who completed TOPS courses (Wickham, 1985:101).

As both Cockburn (1987) and Wickham (1985) argue, the MSC has been sensitive to the training needs of girls and women from its inception. In a report on training opportunities for women (MSC, 1976) the problems experienced by women in gaining access to training and the inadequacy of existing training provision were acknowledged. Wickham describes this report as:

...the first major initiative by the state in the post-war period to consider the specific training needs of women  
Wickham, 1985:100).

While the TOPS programmes sponsored by the MSC could be considered a success in that more women enrolled on them than they had done before 1972, the problem of sex-stereotyping in enrolment patterns was clear. Wickham explains:

Women on TOPS schemes were found mainly in 'female' occupations. Most of them took courses in clerical work, shorthand and typing....Very few women were to be found in the higher level courses or in the government skill centres where subjects such as engineering, vehicle repair, carpentry and joinery, capstan setting machining and bricklaying were taught (Wickham, 1985:101).

The problem here, as in female enrolment patterns on MSC schemes for school-leavers and in NAFE generally, is one of access to knowledge



and educational credentials. Female students are not denied access to institutions or training programmes, but their curricular choices within these structures limit eventual occupational destinations to feminised segments of the labour market.

The activities of the MSC within NAFE since the mid-1970s embody two as yet irreconcilable purposes. The first is to bring course provision into closer alignment with the needs of employers. The second is to promote the free flow of talent and skills into the labour market. These twin purposes can only be achieved if 'talent' and 'skill' are considered to exist in an abstract form, disembodied from their human carriers. The failure of successive MSC schemes to break down the barriers of sexual discrimination and segregation that exist within the structures of the labour market indicates that 'talent' and 'skill' are not abstract qualities. Most employers expect that particular skills will be embodied in specific groups of people. So long as course provision in NAFE is linked to the needs of employers, then gender and other divisions of the labour market will continue to be reflected in such provision. The 'responsive' college is thus an essentially conservative institution.

Female students have never experienced problems in gaining access to the relatively low level vocational courses provided in colleges of further education. This ease of access can be compared with the well-documented difficulties that women experienced in gaining access to élite forms of curricular provision in universities both in the 19th

century (Burstyn, 1980; Delamont and Duffin, 1978; Dyhouse, 1981; Purvis, 1991). When female students make up over a half of the total enrolments in NAFE, the problem is clearly not one of access to institutions as a whole. In the more detailed analysis of course enrolment figures with which the chapter concludes, I shall demonstrate that although women dominate numerically in total NAFE enrolments there are important qualitative differences between male and female enrolment patterns.

I now turn to a more detailed description of Riverbank College. First I examine the tertiary college concept and how it took shape in college structures. Then I briefly compare the enrolment patterns of female students in NAFE nationally with those in Riverbank College. Gender divisions in course enrolment patterns are just as strongly marked in the former as in the latter. As I shall demonstrate, transplanting the comprehensive principle into a college of further education strengthened rather eroded long-standing institutional boundaries between education and training.

#### RIVERBANK COLLEGE

Riverbank College is a college of further education in West Port, a small industrial town set in a predominantly rural area in the south-west of England. As part of the plan for comprehensive reorganisation of secondary education in West Port, Riverbank College opened as a tertiary college in September 1973 [1].



Before that date there had been four mixed secondary modern schools, two single-sex grammar schools and one technical college in the town. On reorganisation in 1973, the grammar school sixth-form students were transferred to what had previously been West Port Technical College, which was then redesignated a tertiary college and renamed Riverbank College. Four mixed comprehensive schools catering for the 11 to 16 age group were established in the town [2].

Before moving into a more detailed examination of college structures it is necessary to give a brief account of the educational philosophy and idealism that surrounded the establishment of tertiary colleges. The dominant strand in this idealism was concerned with breaking down barriers between vocational education and academic education.

#### THE TERTIARY COLLEGE CONCEPT

Sir William Alexander is credited with first having used the term 'tertiary college' when suggesting:

...that the secondary stage of education should be limited to the age of 16...and that there should be established tertiary colleges providing both full- and part-time education from this stage to 18 plus (Alexander, 1969 quoted in Bridgwood and Ashforth, 1990:1).

In general terms the tertiary college is an extension of the comprehensive school principle into post-compulsory education. However, tertiary colleges have always been difficult to define precisely. Although tertiary colleges are organised under further education

regulations, the early pioneers of tertiary colleges emphasised the distinctive nature of this particular type of further education college. It is fundamental to the original concept of tertiary colleges that they should not be in competition with other neighbouring providers of full-time courses for the 16-19 age group, such as sixth-form colleges or sixth forms of all-through comprehensive schools. Terry therefore defines a tertiary college as:

...a comprehensive post-sixteen institution, providing full and part-time academic and vocational courses to meet the needs in a locality of all, or nearly all, people aged over sixteen and with no upper age limit (Terry 1987:32).

The concern about competition for students with neighbouring educational institutions is linked to the concept of tertiary colleges as post-compulsory comprehensive institutions. It was hoped that through the establishment of tertiary colleges the invidious separation of the academic from the vocational in post-sixteen educational institutions could be halted (Cotterell and Heley, 1980; Preedy, 1983; Terry, 1987). As Terry argues, 'tertiary colleges stand inconveniently in the way' of any opening up of the divide between 'the theoretical and the applied' (Terry, 1987:180). Much stress was thus placed on the potential for tertiary colleges to break down old barriers between the vocational and the academic in educational provision.

There was also an additional prong to the idealism surrounding the establishment of tertiary colleges. Heley argued that:

The tertiary college may be the anvil on which a more sensible non-sexist education may be hammered out (Heley, 1980:30)



However, this second prong to the argument was considerably more muted than the dominant appeal for an extension of the comprehensive principle into post-compulsory education.

Compared with many other so-called tertiary colleges, Riverbank College is in a very favourable position in terms of its catchment area. Although potentially competing educational institutions exist just over the boundaries of the catchment area, they are sufficiently distant to make the cost of transport and time spent in travelling a considerable deterrent to students. In terms of numbers of student enrolments Riverbank College fits almost exactly what Terry describes as the 'model for a tertiary college'. He explains that:

...a tertiary college could be the sole sixteen-plus institution in a small town remote from others and have 500 or 600 hundred full-time students aged under nineteen, half of whom would be recognised as possible sixth-formers, as well as perhaps three times that number of part-time students, some daytime but most adults coming for evening classes (Terry 1987:33).

During the academic year 1986/1987 full-time students in Riverbank College numbered 631. Just over three hundred of these students could be considered to come into Terry's category of 'possible sixth-formers' in that they were in the 16-19 age group and were following a course that included at least one GCE Advanced level subject. During the same academic year part-time students in Riverbank College numbered 4,300, so the proportion of part-time to full-time enrolments is higher than that in Terry's definition of a tertiary college. It is worth noting, though, that almost exactly half of these part-time enrolments were on courses

classified as 'leisure classes'. Such large numbers of part-time enrolments are possibly due to the fact that Riverbank College continues the practice of West Port Technical College in providing a wide variety of adult leisure and recreational classes in the isolated rural communities that surround the town.

As a tertiary college, Riverbank College was thus very favourably placed to fulfil the aspirations for such a radical change in post-compulsory education. However, new educational institutions do not spring into spontaneous existence. In any restructuring or reorganisation, the new has to build to some extent on the human and material resources that already exist. The next section of the chapter will concentrate on describing the reallocation of human resources available at the time of reorganisation. Two aspects of the life of the new institution will be considered; the curricular divisions between vocational and academic work and those between male and female students.

#### ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL DIVISIONS

The retirement of the Principal of West Port Technical College just before comprehensive reorganisation in 1973 left the way open for the appointment of a tertiary college Principal who had no prior association with any of the institutions involved in the reorganisation. Below this level, departmental structures and the majority of the teaching appointments within them replicated pre-reorganisation divisions between the defunct technical college and the grammar schools in West Port.



There were to be five teaching departments in the new college, each with a Head of Department whose function was primarily administrative. In September 1973 the departments were:

- Building and Engineering
- Business Studies
- Science and Mathematics
- Humanities
- Liberal and Adult Education

Teaching staff in the previously existing technical college were left in post and formed the core of the two 'vocational' departments of the new institution - the Department of Building and Engineering and the Department of Business Studies. These departments continued their pre-reorganisation work of providing full-time, part-time day-release and evening courses for students who were either already in employment or working towards qualifications that would enable them to find immediate employment in the local labour market. These two departments were staffed almost entirely by teachers who had worked in West Port Technical College. Similarly, the department of Liberal and Adult Education remained very largely unchanged both in staffing and in its role of providing liberal studies teaching on vocational courses. This department was also responsible for providing a wide range of mainly recreational classes in Riverbank College and adult education centres in the surrounding rural areas. Thus staffing patterns and the functions of these three departments were left virtually intact by reorganisation.

Change was most apparent in the creation of two new departments, the Department of Humanities and the Department of Science and

Mathematics. The bulk of GCE Ordinary and Advanced level work was carried out in these two departments. These two departments could be said to have undertaken responsibility for 'academic' aspects of the work of the new college.

Before reorganisation teaching staff in the six secondary schools in the town were asked to choose between teaching in the new college and teaching in one of the four new 11-16 comprehensive schools to be established. The majority of the teachers in the secondary modern schools opted to teach in the 11-16 comprehensive schools. Most of the teachers in the two grammar schools opted for the tertiary college. The majority of these teachers had experience of teaching at GCE Advanced level and many were subject heads of department. Depending on their subject speciality, they were allocated to one or other of two newly established 'academic' departments of the college, the Department of Humanities or the Department of Science and Mathematics. These teachers found that the greatest change in their work was the loss of students in the 11-16 age group. Otherwise they found themselves as subject specialists mostly confined to teaching their subject at GCE Ordinary and/or Advanced level. Their task was to continue their work of preparing students for entry into higher education or further professional training.

There were, of course, some exceptions to this pattern. However, the general outcome of the reallocation of staff in 1973 was that the new departmental structures exacerbated the division between the



'vocational' and 'academic' work done in the college. The former was identified with the indigenous culture of the previously existing technical college teachers and the latter with the invading culture of the ex-grammar school teachers.

More recent staff appointments and modifications to departmental structures have done little to diminish this cultural gap [3]. Battle imagery abounds in educational literature; students and teachers are described as being lined up in hostile and opposing factions (Willis, 1977; Woods, 1979). If battle lines could be said to exist anywhere in Riverbank College then they exist between competing cultural definitions of teaching and learning and the purposes of these processes. There are some parallels here with accounts of reorganisation in secondary schools (Riseborough, 1984) which record the painful amalgamation of competing teacher cultures. The situation in Riverbank College is made slightly different in that departments, as they are in most colleges of further education, are almost completely autonomous units within the college structure. Cultural conflict therefore takes place at a distance.

Outwardly, very little changed in September 1973 apart from the sudden appearance of some extra terrapin huts on the old West Port Technical College site. These were required in order to house the influx of additional students from the grammar school sixth-forms. Internally, it was the two new 'academic' departments which had to engage in lengthy debates and experiments with timetabling and course structures in order to forge a new identity. In the early years of the college's existence

the burden was on these two departments to prove to critics and sceptics that the academic standards of the grammar school sixth-forms could be maintained in a tertiary college [4]. In contrast, the work of the previously existing 'vocational' departments was left much as it had been before reorganisation. The ability of the new tertiary college to make adequate provision for students on vocational courses was not questioned. The teaching staff in the indigenous 'vocational' departments remained secure in their course provision with its emphasis on training students for employment in specific sectors of the labour market.

The new college brought two cultures - the 'academic' and the 'vocational' - within the framework of a single institution but it did not integrate them or break down previously existing barriers between them. In fact, as has been explained, it confirmed their separate identities.

#### GENDER DIVISIONS

In spite of hopes that a 'non-sexist' education could be worked out in tertiary colleges (Heley, 1980:30), gender divisions in Riverbank College remained as strong as the division between academic courses and vocational courses.

It is important to note, though, that the gender divisions in Riverbank College replicate patterns in NAFE nationally. As I argued earlier in the chapter, new institutions do not spring spontaneously



into existence. Riverbank College is rooted in the past. It is a college of further education and so shares in the history of the development of the further education sector outlined earlier in the chapter. Until the early 1970s, the gender divisions of the labour market were taken for granted by policy makers. Although female students were readily admitted to colleges of further education, such course provision as existed provided training for traditionally 'female' occupations. Enrolments on full-time vocational courses in Riverbank College reflect this history.

Female students outnumber male students on full-time courses in Riverbank College as they do in NAFE nationally [5]. However, in the academic year 1986/7 all students in Riverbank College on the following full-time courses were female:

- Nursery Nurses (NNEB)
- Pre-nursing (all levels)
- Office Skills (all levels)
- Community Care

On the other hand, there were 70 students on full-time courses in the Department of Building and Engineering in 1986/7. Only two of these students were female. The sex-stereotypical nature of student course choices here is very clear. Female students are clustered in 'caring' courses and office skills courses and male students are clustered in the traditionally 'masculine' areas of building and engineering.

In contrast to their numerical dominance on full-time courses, female students are in the minority on day-release courses. It has long been recognised that male students far outnumber female students on day-

release courses in colleges of further education (DES, 1964; Ministry of Education, 1956 and 1958). More recent research (Benett and Carter, 1983; Cockburn, 1987; Wickham, 1986) confirms that old patterns of gender inequalities in day-release training persist. Riverbank College is not immune from the national problem since enrolment figures in Riverbank College replicate the pattern of enrolment figures in NAFE nationally [5].

As I recorded earlier in the chapter, more recent developments in the further education sector are equally strongly marked by gender inequalities. Although these inequalities in training provision are not now so readily taken for granted by policy makers, practice does not reflect policy directives aimed at breaking down old barriers and prejudices. Enrolment figures on YTS courses nationally, for example, demonstrate the persistence of sex-stereotypical patterns of course choices (Cockburn, 1987; Wickham, 1986; WNC, 1984). The same problem exists in Riverbank College. In the academic year 1986/7 YTS students were on courses provided by the two 'vocational' departments in the college - the Department of Business Studies and the Department of Building and Engineering. In total, there were 167 YTS students. 60 female students but only six male students were on office skills courses in the Department of Business Studies. In the Department of Building and Engineering there were 99 male students but only two female students.

My argument is that vocationalism, whether new or old, has done very little to extend opportunities for female students beyond the



traditional boundaries of women's work. The further education sector readily provides ample space for female students and, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, successfully prepares them for labour market participation. However, this freedom of access to further education has to be balanced against the constraints of what follows course completion.

### CONCLUSION

The new tertiary college was created in 1973, during the second phase of the post-war development of the further education sector outlined at the beginning of this chapter. During these last two decades the relationship, actual and desired, between the economy and educational provision has become a central focus of educational and political debate. As Reeder (1981) indicates, this debate is not new. The current revival of the debate can be traced back to a speech made at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1976 by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan. The educational system was accused of being 'out of touch' with what is frequently described in official discourse as 'the world of work'. The main remedy intended to cure this deficiency centres around curricular reforms which are intended to realign educational goals with the needs of industry and commerce. Such a narrowly conceived view both of the problem and its remedy has met with much criticism; in the process it has also created a disturbing crisis of purpose and identity in educational institutions.

I have already indicated that the further education sector, more so than any other sector of the educational system, has remained on the periphery of this debate. This is not to say that it has not felt the effects of the debate in the form of new course provision (YTS) and new curricular developments (TVEI). The changes brought about by these developments in NAFE have often been traumatic, but this is mainly because such changes have been imposed on colleges at great speed and with little discussion. In the process, though, further education colleges have not been asked to question their fundamental, traditional activities of maintaining close links with local employers and preparing students for direct entry into the 'world of work'.

In a speech made to the 1989 annual conference of the Association of Colleges of Further and Higher Education, the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, said that the way forward for colleges was simply to 'do better' what they were already doing. He drew a neat analogy between further education colleges and the Cinderella story. First he exhorted colleges to boost their dowdy image by actively and attractively marketing their courses. Then, he promised, colleges could be seen in their 'true light' and like Cinderella 'dance forward to the centre of the ballroom' (Baker, 1989:22).

Within the life-time of the study various efforts have been made in Riverbank College to attract mature female students into curricular areas which have previously been regarded as 'masculine' curricular areas. The first part of the title of the majority of these courses has



been 'Women into....' followed by a description of the particular curricular area of the course. Two examples are 'Women into Management' and 'Women into Technology'. Another such course, 'Women into Work', was funded by the European Social Fund. The aim of this course was to provide mature female students with the technical and social skills necessary to enable them to seek employment in a range of traditionally masculinised segments of the labour market such as painting and decorating, carpentry and motor vehicle maintenance. The underlying philosophy of courses such as these is that of liberal feminism. Their parallel in the compulsory years of schooling would be the GIST (Girls into Science and Technology) project.

As was argued in Chapter Two, courses such as these do nothing to challenge the gender inequalities that exist in the structures and conditions of the labour market. While these courses struggled to attract sufficient students and/or find labour market placements for those students who completed their course, the more traditional vocational courses which mirrored the sexual divisions of the labour market faced no such problems.

This then is the institutional background against which the ethnographic core of the study must be placed. It constitutes the innermost contextual layer of the model proposed by Pollard (1982) in order to explain classroom behaviour. At the institutional level we have an educational setting with a long history of welcoming female students and providing courses for them. However, the larger part of this course

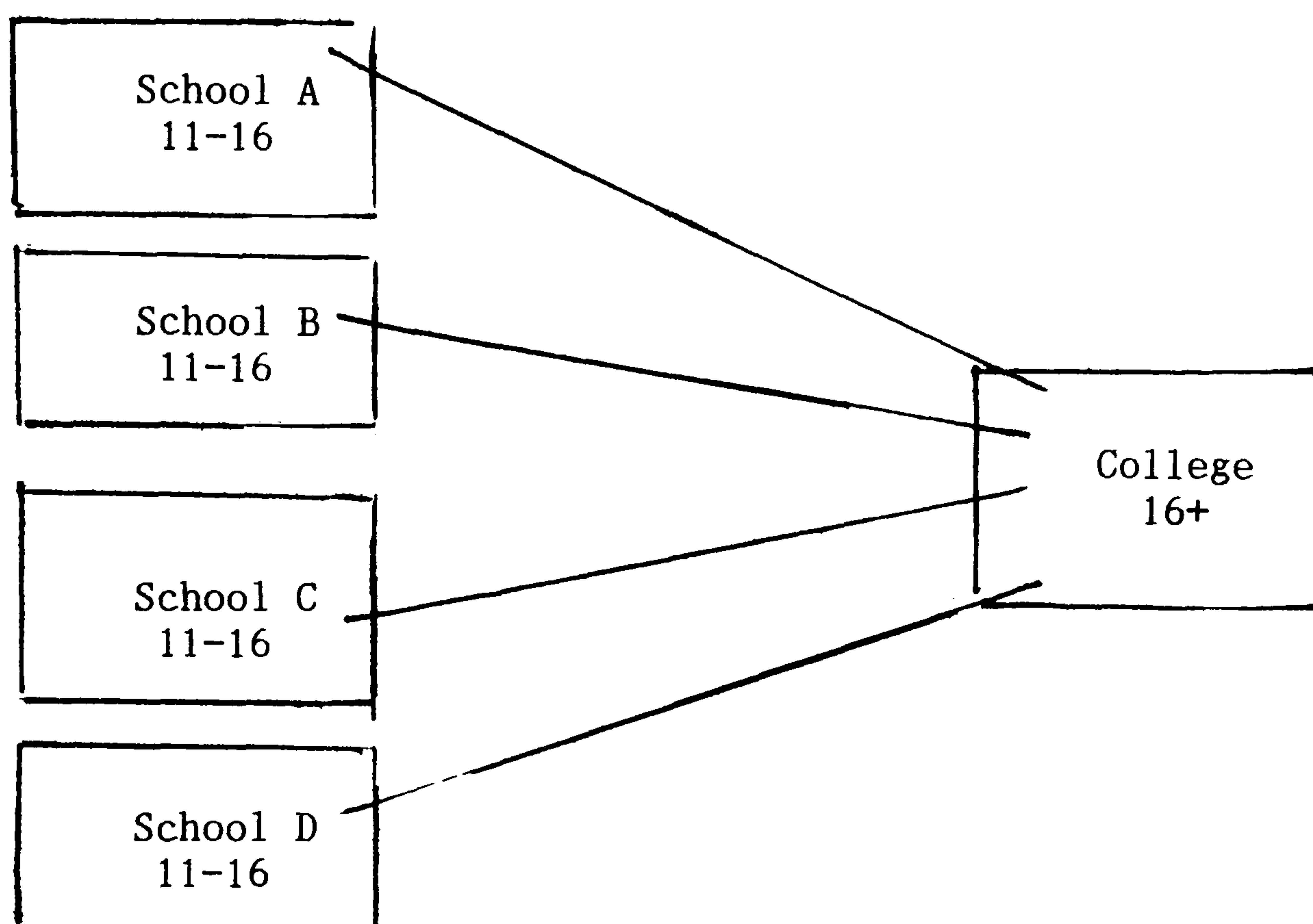
provision has in the past, and still does, give female students access only to feminised segments of the labour market.



## FOOTNOTES

[1] The information given here is not based on the collection of data but on my own experience as a teacher involved in the process of reorganisation. From 1971-1973 I was a teacher in one of the two grammar schools in West Port. On reorganisation I opted to move to the new tertiary college.

[2] The pattern after reorganisation was as follows:



[3] This was the case until the period of fieldwork ended in 1989. During 1989 the man who had been Principal of the college since 1973 retired. Just before and immediately after the appointment of the new Principal many staff took early retirement. New appointments have considerably eroded the pre-reorganisation 'grammar school' and 'technical college' divisions. Whether or not this has eroded divisions between the 'academic' and the 'vocational' elements of the work of the college is a matter for further empirical investigation.

[4] In addition to anxiety about 'academic' standards, deep concern was also expressed by critics about the adequacy of provision for pastoral care in the new tertiary college. The two new 'academic' departments therefore spent much time and energy in creating and maintaining systems of pastoral care.

[5] Figures used in this chapter relating to student enrolments nationally are adapted from DES Statistics of Education: Further Education (1987), London, HMSO. Figures relating to student enrolment in Riverbank College are adapted from the Further Education Student Records (FESR) (1987) which all colleges in the county have to submit County Hall each February. Both sets of figures are based on the same academic year, that of 1986/7. The DES figures include details of student enrolments on both advanced and non-advanced courses in further education. Since by far the majority of the work carried out in Riverbank College is classified as non-advanced, I use the national figures for enrolments on non-advanced courses when making comparison between national enrolment patterns and those in Riverbank College.

It would clearly have been useful to compare Riverbank College figure with national enrolment patterns throughout the time span of the study. Unfortunately this was not possible. Early in 1987 I took part in an Equal Opportunities programme. This was funded through the MSC as part of the LEA's TVEI Related In-Service Training (TRIST) programme. It was agreed that each participant should undertake a small research project aimed at raising awareness of gender inequalities in his or her school/college. My contribution was to produce a document 'Focus on Women: a gender map of Riverbank College'. After this document was presented to the Academic Board in February 1988 I was never again given access to FESR data.

The solution to this problem was to use the FESR figures that I had for 1986/7 and compare them with the available national figures for that academic year.



## CHAPTER SIX

### A MATTER OF COURSE

During the last two decades a steady flow of ethnographic studies of primary and secondary schools has greatly enhanced our capacity to appreciate the cultural world of students and teachers in these settings. In contrast, classrooms in colleges of further education have been neglected by educational ethnographers. This section of the thesis therefore takes us into unexplored educational terrain.

So little is known about classroom life in colleges of further education in general that descriptions of even the most mundane daily routines and practices to be found in them would considerably extend sociological knowledge of teaching and learning. The first chapter in Part Three of the thesis, Chapter Six, is thus largely descriptive. In it I concentrate on such routine elements of classroom life in the Secretarial Section of Riverbank College as curriculum content, pedagogical practices and teacher assessments of students.

#### CLASSROOM LIFE IN CONTEXT

To the observer, the most striking feature of classroom life in this setting is the almost complete absence of overt conflict between teachers and students. The classroom behaviour of students suggests that they uncritically accept the equal value of all the subjects that make up their formal curriculum. The classroom behaviour of teachers suggests that they too have no criticisms either of the formal curriculum as an



adequate preparation for the world of office work or of the working conditions of the office.

Had data collection remained at the level of classroom observation, it would have been possible to describe student behaviour as 'conformist' and teacher behaviour as 'conservative'. It was only data collected in interviews and in written responses to questionnaires that gave any indication of the activity submerged beneath the placid surface of the majority of classroom interaction. Chapters Seven and Eight therefore draw on these data in order to attempt an explanation of the observed behaviour recorded in Chapter Six. The general argument put forward is that the working consensus of the classroom is the outcome of active choices and decisions made by students and teachers. It is not simply a passive response to conditions beyond their choice.

The outer boundaries of teacher and student behaviour in the classrooms of the secretarial section of Riverbank College have been examined in earlier chapters. At this point in the thesis it is important to reiterate that these outer boundaries are regarded, not as explanatory forces, but as frameworks within which action takes place. The students and teachers in this study are regarded as active agents who are capable of responding reflexively to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Their joint actions within the classroom may ultimately act to reproduce the sexual divisions of the labour market, but this does not necessarily reduce such actions to mechanistic responses to external imperatives.

As I have argued elsewhere (Black, 1989), it is easy to criticise most vocational courses in colleges of further education in that they manifestly reproduce the sexual divisions of the labour market. However, it is not so easy to explain either how or why this process of reproduction occurs. The aim of this section of the thesis is to get beyond the simplistic reproduction metaphor and grapple with an explanation of human behaviour in a specific context that takes into account the duality of structure and action.

The main focus of this chapter is on the preparation of General Secretarial and TOPS students for entry into the labour market as office workers. The patterns of teaching and learning in colleges of further education are organised around course structures; Riverbank College is no exception to this. Full-time course structures shape a student's curriculum, end-of-course qualifications and post-course destination. The college prospectus gives details of General Secretarial and TOPS courses under five headings:

- duration of course
- entry requirements
- subjects studied
- examinations
- employment prospects

The route into employment ('employment prospects') is thus clearly defined first by curriculum content ('subjects studied') and then by the acquisition of associated skills measured by the possession of relevant examination certificates ('examinations'). Pedagogical practices in the classroom confirm the statement made in the college prospectus in that



they are firmly based on an understanding of the prime importance of technical skills measured by success in external examinations.

However, it is also recognised that in this setting, as in other educational settings, the formal curriculum is but one thread in the fabric of teaching and learning. What has become known as the 'hidden' curriculum has for many years received attention in educational literature (Jackson, 1968; Dreeben, 1968). Indeed, the correspondence theory formulated by Bowles and Gintis (1976) is based on the argument that it is the form rather than the content of the curriculum that is most influential in the reproduction of class inequalities in a capitalist society. The main thrust of much feminist educational research, too, has been to point to the hidden lessons that many girls are taught in the classroom concerning such things as appropriately 'feminine' forms of behaviour, curricular choices and career aspirations. It is clear that any analysis of the process of teaching and learning must take into account more than the formal curriculum.

There are, of course, problems in defining exactly what constitutes the hidden curriculum. At its broadest it has been defined as '...all other things that are learned during schooling in addition to the official curriculum (Meighan, 1981:52). Studies both of secretaries at work and of secretarial training emphasise the importance of distinguishing between the technical and the social skills required of female office workers (Barker and Downing, 1981; Griffin, 1985; Pringle, 1988; Valli, 1986). Griffin, for example, found that having 'the right

personality' to learn the non-technical aspects of secretarial work was an important criterion for selection onto a private, in-service secretarial course run by a large engineering firm (Griffin, 1985:124). The terminological distinction made in this body of work between technical skills and social skills will be employed in this and subsequent chapters of the thesis.

The main aim of this chapter is therefore to unravel the tangled web of the formal curriculum of technical skills and the hidden curriculum of social skills and assess the part played by each in the preparation of General Secretarial and TOPS students for office work.

#### THE FORMAL CURRICULUM

Some course structures in Riverbank College maximise a student's individual choice of subjects and are based on an à la carte curricular model. Others are based on a table d'hôte curricular model in that they present students with a complete curriculum package. General Secretarial courses and TOPS courses are examples of the latter curricular model. With very few exceptions students on both courses are exposed to a course package which is, in effect, a common curriculum.

Only a small minority of students on General Secretarial and TOPS courses reject the course as a whole. They do this simply by dropping out, usually at some point during the first term. By far the majority of students stay within the boundaries of the course as a whole, but are selective in their responses to the individual subjects which make up



their course curriculum. For the most part, student classroom strategies are based on conflict avoidance. While covertly they might reject one element or more of their course package, there is scarcely any overt evidence of this rejection in the classroom. In order to progress towards the qualifications that they deem relevant for their future occupational needs, students stay with the whole course even though this includes some subjects which they have come to regard as irrelevant. Long term goals thus over-ride immediate dissatisfaction with individual subjects.

This selective response to the various elements of the formal curriculum is explored in some detail in Chapter Seven. The general point to be stressed here is that, in this setting, the content of the formal curriculum emerges as the most significant defining feature of the classroom encounter. This is perhaps not very surprising and yet such an obvious feature of classroom life is a frequently neglected factor in the analysis of the classroom encounter as it exists in much educational literature. Interactionist studies have tended to concentrate on an examination of the social aspects of the classroom encounter, treating it as though it were devoid of any formal cognitive content. It is possible to come away from a reading of this literature with scarcely any awareness of the formal educational purposes which permeate and have a vital part in shaping student/teacher interaction in the classroom. Burgess argues that:

....if classroom research is to get close to the teaching-learning nexus it will be important for researchers to examine the ways in which classroom strategies are associated with curriculum content (Burgess, 1986:199).

Since the formal curriculum has such a high salience both in the college prospectus and in classroom processes, the chapter begins with a description of the teaching and learning of three subjects which together make up the core of the formal curriculum for both groups of students.

Two of these subjects, shorthand and typing, have been chosen for close consideration since together they represent the basic technical skills of the aspiring office worker. Both skills have a clear exchange value in the labour market and thus have an important place in the formal curriculum of office skills courses. As can be seen from the timetable details given below, shorthand (including shorthand transcription for TOPS students) and typing (including audio-typing for TOPS students) together make up approximately two thirds of the weekly timetable for TOPS students and just over one third of the weekly timetable for General Secretarial students.

In the academic year 1985/6 the weekly timetable for TOPS students was:

Shorthand	9 hours
Audio-typing	5½ hours
Typing	5¼ hours
Communication Studies	3 hours
Word Processing	3½ hours
Secretarial Duties	2 hours
Shorthand transcript	1 hour



The timetable for the 1985/6 cohort of General Secretarial students was:

English Language	6 hours
Typing	5 hours
Shorthand	5 hours
Private study	3¼ hours
Word Processing	2 hours
Office Practice	1½ hours
Business Calculations	1 hour
Elective Studies	2½ hours

The third subject, Office Practice/Secretarial Duties, has been chosen for close examination since it does not enjoy the same obvious labour market exchange value as typing and shorthand. The main purpose of the subject is to give students some simulated experience of the more general aspects of office procedures.

I begin with the teaching and learning of shorthand and typing and then proceed to Office Practice/Secretarial Duties. In both shorthand and typing there are two distinct phases to the learning process. The first phase consists of the learning of what teachers describe as 'theory'. Theory is taught in small units and thoroughly practised through the use of repetitive drilling techniques. Once the body of theory has been worked through, then the second phase of the learning process begins. This consists of preparation for external examinations during which time theory is put into practice in a way that, as far as possible, simulates the use of shorthand and typing skills in the office.

Towards the end of this first phase two closely related processes of differentiation take place. First, teachers differentiate between students in their ability to absorb the theory and put it into practice. Secondly, as has already been indicated, students differentiate between the various elements of their curriculum package based on the anticipated utility of each element and its labour market currency.

## SHORTHAND

### Learning the theory

The shorthand course begins with a heavy load of 'theory'. This is the teaching and learning of what shorthand shapes equate to what phonetic sounds. Students learn a few basic shorthand shapes and then practise the use of these shapes by having simple sentences repeated over and over again. Until all the theory has been learned the structure of lessons follows the same pattern of checking some of what has already been learned and then adding new knowledge by means of various drilling techniques. Even in these early stages of learning, the importance of speed is stressed. All shorthand teachers carry a stopwatch. From the very beginning of the course the stopwatch dominates drills and exercises since it is used to calculate the speed in words per minute (wpm) at which even the shortest sentence is dictated to students.

What follows is a combination of part of a transcript of an audio-tape recording of a shorthand lesson and notes made on the spot. The students are on the 1985/6 General Secretarial course. This lesson takes place at the beginning of their second week in the college, so their



only experience of this subject is just over five hours of tuition in the previous week.

The lesson begins with students handing in their homework from an earlier lesson. The teacher then directs students to a page and exercise in their text books which gives three short sentences in shorthand symbols. Students are asked collectively to chant aloud the longhand 'translation' of these sentences. The teacher then says she will dictate these sentences and students are directed to write down the shorthand version in their spiral notepad. Before she begins dictation the teacher says, 'If you can manage to do this without looking at your books, that's good'. Obviously some copying of the shorthand shapes in the text book is acceptable at this stage. Then the drilling begins.

The teacher dictates the first sentence 'I beg you to pay the debt to them.' Students write the shorthand version of this sentence in their spiral notepads. As early as the second week of the course students know that the next stage of the drill is that they self-check against the shorthand shapes in their textbook and correct any errors in their own shorthand. They do this silently without any prompting from the teacher. After a short interval allowed for self-checking, the teacher says, 'Hands up those who got it right'. Most hands go up and the teacher says, 'Good'. She then repeats the same sentence at the same speed. Students go through the same routine of self-checking and correcting against the textbook. Then the teacher says, 'I'm going to dictate the same sentence at 60 words a minute and see whether you can keep up.' She does this and there are no obvious signs of distress from students. The teacher then says, 'That wasn't too bad was it? Shall we try it at 80 [words per minute]?' The sentence is dictated at the higher speed and again there are no signs of distress; the majority of students are obviously well able to keep up with the dictation of this sentence at this speed. The teacher confirms their success by saying, 'That wasn't hopeless was it?'

By this stage in the lesson students have 'translated' this sentence out loud from its shorthand to its longhand version. They have also written it down three times in shorthand to dictation at different speeds and corrected any errors in their own shorthand transcription.



This repetitive drilling is a distinctive feature of the teaching and learning of shorthand at all stages of the course. The process is very much like that of training athletes to perform over longer and longer distances at increasingly higher speeds. The lesson continues with more repetitive drilling.

The teacher dictates a second sentence from the textbook, 'It makes sense to face the foe and save the folk in their bases'. As before, students write the shorthand version in their spiral notepads. At the end of the dictation the teacher prompts by saying 'Check and see if you got it right. Correct anything if you got it wrong before we repeat it.' Students do this silently and the same sentence is then repeated at the same speed. The teacher then says: 'Check again before I repeat the same sentence at 60 [words per minute]'. The sentence is then repeated at 60 words per minute.

The same routine is repeated for the third sentence in this exercise in the textbook, 'It is said they may take them to guess the name of the boat in the bay today.' By this time the routine has been established. The teacher dictates the sentence at increasingly higher speeds and at each stage students self-check their work without any direction from the teacher.

The three sentences which have formed the basis of the dictation exercises so far contain shorthand shapes which have been learned and drilled in a previous lesson. After this consolidation, the teacher moves on to new material.

Students are directed to the section of their textbook which gives examples of words containing the short 'u' sound as in 'up' and 'cup'. The textbook gives both the longhand version of these words and the corresponding shorthand shape. Students are told to practise copying the shorthand shape of these words in their spiral notepads. As they do this, the teacher moves round the class, making encouraging comments on students' work, 'Good, some of you are writing the shapes very nicely'. When necessary she offers help, 'Shall I help you?' and then encouragement, 'Yes, you're nearly there'.



Most of the rest of class time is taken up in using the same drilling technique that was used during the first phase of the lesson, but this time with three sentences that include some words which contain the short 'u' sound.

Five minutes before the end of the lesson the teacher creates a space in which she prepares the ground for the next lesson on the following day. She gives clear instructions about the homework that students are expected to do before then. They are pointed towards the relevant pages of their textbooks with the added directive, 'You could do all of this in the free period that you have later today'.

This pattern of teaching and learning is repeated lesson after lesson until students have worked their way through the basic textbook which covers all the theory of shorthand. During this process, which occupies approximately the first term of the course, students are treated as far as possible as a homogeneous group. However, by the end of the first term it is clear that some students are absorbing the theory more quickly than others.

### Student differentiation

In the first shorthand lesson described above two teaching techniques were described which make public different levels of ability. One is that of asking students to chant aloud the longhand version of words and sentences which are printed in the shorthand form in their textbook. At first this is done as a collective, class activity. At a later stage the teacher adopts the technique of asking individuals to 'translate' sentences aloud. Some students have more difficulty in doing this than others so their weakness in understanding is made public. However, I never observed a teacher allow a student to fail completely in

performing this kind of task. A common protective strategy adopted was to nurse a student through the translation, shorthand shape by shorthand shape, giving encouragement throughout. The second technique is the dictation of the same sentence at progressively higher speeds, usually in increments of 10 or 20 words per minute. As is clear from the first lesson described above, students are expected to put up their hand when asked by the teacher as a public indicator of whether or not they were able to keep up with the different dictation speeds. There is also a protective strategy associated with this technique. All students are expected to be able to manage the lowest speed, but simply keeping up with some parts of the sentence or passage when the dictation speed is increased is rewarded by praise from the teacher.

This differentiation between levels of ability is made apparent to students through the routine, almost daily, assessments of their homework and classwork carried out by their teachers. It is also made clear in the report they receive, as do all full-time students, at the end of the first term of the course. Students receive a course work grade and a written comment on each of the subjects which make up their curriculum. Course work grades are as follows:

- A = very good
- B = good
- C = borderline
- D = fail.

An analysis of the Christmas report sent out to students in the 1985/6 General Secretarial cohort indicates the wide spread of



achievement only twelve weeks into a thirty-six week course and before any external examinations have been taken. There were twenty-one students in the group; their course work grades in shorthand are as follows:

Grade A - 0 students  
Grade B - 7 students  
Grade C - 8 students  
Grade D - 6 students

An analysis of the written comments which accompany the award of B and D grades (the highest and lowest grades awarded here) indicates that in the teacher's opinion, it is lack of such qualities as 'application' or 'neatness' that are impeding student progress. Those who were awarded a B grade are praised for being 'industrious', 'diligent', 'efficient' and 'conscientious'. One of the students awarded a B grade was described as 'sensible and mature'. In a later section of the chapter I consider the importance of personal attributes in teachers' assessments of students. The point to be stressed here is that the range of grades awarded for shorthand on the Christmas report indicates the wide spread of achievement which already exists. This has implications for the way in which shorthand teachers manage the next stage of the course in which students are prepared for external examinations.

#### Preparing for the examination

After students have mastered the body of basic theory, lessons take on a slightly different shape. The passages dictated by teachers get progressively longer than the short sentence exercises described above

and, more importantly, students have to be able to transcribe their own shorthand back into longhand. In one General Secretarial lesson students were given five minutes to look over a passage in shorthand which was in their course text book. The teacher then said:

When you're ready we'll do the dictation and then see if you can transcribe it. You realise you need to have a clean page [in spiral notepad] and you're not to cheat and look at your books. I want you to do it free and not copy dictation. In no exam are you going to have the perfect shorthand in front of you I'm afraid. Are you all ready? Turn your text books over and make sure you've got a clean page.

This statement by the teacher introduces a new teaching technique, free dictation, which distinguishes the examination preparation phase from the first phase of the course.

During the first phase students were allowed to look at their text books during dictation and, if necessary, copy shorthand shapes from it. This is known as copy dictation. During the examination preparation phase students are expected to work under the rules of free dictation which means they are not allowed allowed to look at their text books as they were in the earlier stage of the course. The aim of free dictation is to simulate working conditions in the office when shorthand writing has to be sufficiently accurate to enable it to be transcribed accurately. Even at very late stages in the course I heard students say to the teacher 'I can get the shorthand down, but I can't transcribe it quickly enough.' During this later stage of the course speed has to be combined with accuracy, as it would both in the examination and in any work situation.



The nearer students get to the date of external examinations, the more the teacher has to identify and differentiate between students who are capable of writing shorthand and successfully transcribing it at different speeds. Those students who are learning slowly have to be encouraged to achieve what is the highest possible speed for them. Those who are learning more quickly have to be given sufficient stimulus to maintain their rate of progress. The lowest examinable speed is 50 wpm; examination grades then work upwards in increments of ten words per minute. As it was in the early stages of the course, evidence of success and failure in these speed tests in class is made very public. It is easy for an observer to spot the students who are not able to keep up with the teacher's dictation; they simply stop writing before the end of the dictation. Teachers also ask at the end of the dictation: 'Who managed to keep up with me?' Those students who do not put up their hand are thus giving a public indicator of their failure.

In these later stages of the course it becomes impossible to disguise the fact that some students have achieved a much higher level of competence than others. In one shorthand lesson with the 1986/7 cohort of General Secretarial students I observed a teacher strategy which overcame the potential embarrassment of the public display of different levels of competence. The teacher first dictated a passage at a speed which she estimated to be achievable by all students in the class. She then repeated the same passage at the next highest speed, inviting all students to join in regardless of their performance in the first dictation. The speed of dictation was gradually increased until

even the swiftest writers collapsed. The whole process ended in a great deal of laughter. All students came to know their own level of competence but, since even the swiftest writers did not survive the final dictation, good humour pervaded the exercise.

In this subject, more so than in any others that I observed, the teacher is in complete control of the rhythm of classroom activities. Interactions between students and the teacher are very brief and usually initiated by the teacher. When a student initiates an interaction it nearly always springs from a concern to clarify an earlier instruction given by the teacher: 'Did you say we would have to hand this in to be marked?' or 'Did you say that passage was dictated at 50 or 60 [words per minute]?' I never observed a teacher's mastery of shorthand being challenged by a student nor did I observe a student challenge the techniques used by a teacher in preparation for the examinations.

It would not be true to say that every student enjoyed shorthand lessons, but I was surprised at the degree of pleasure that most students displayed most of the time in these lessons. Visible or audible signs of student resistance to or rejection of this subject were negligible. When they occurred they were never of such a serious nature that they impeded the flow of the lesson. Student responses to the various elements of the course they were following will be examined later, but it can be noted here that shorthand was the subject that received most frequent comment, both favourable and unfavourable, from students in interview and in more casual encounters. Favourable comments



generally fell into one of two categories. One was that the demands of shorthand as a classroom discipline represented a challenge to which students readily responded. The second was based on the belief that a qualification in shorthand was a valuable commodity in the labour market. Unfavourable comments were always framed around doubts about the practical value of shorthand in the modern office.

In this last respect typing contrasts very strongly with shorthand. Of all the subjects in the curriculum, typing was the one that students most frequently mentioned as a valuable subject. Many students in interview said that they would not like to spend all of their working day typing, but they never-the-less recognise typing as a valuable element in their repertoire of skills.

## TYPING

### Learning the theory

The first stage in a typing course is to learn familiarity with the keyboard. Touch typing is the basic skill which all students must learn as quickly as possible. This is achieved through repetitive drilling exercises. Once students have gained a familiarity with the keyboard, then they begin to learn what is described as the 'theory' of typing.

A very early lesson in theory concerns the rules about different paragraph layouts. What follows is a combination of part of a transcript of a tape recording of a typing lesson and notes made on the spot. The students are on the 1986/7 TOPS course.

The lesson begins with the teacher explaining one particular element of theory to the class as a whole. As the teacher explains and also demonstrates in diagramatic form on the blackboard, students make their own notes to be kept in a file for future reference.

The teacher illustrates the different paragraph layouts on the blackboard. She explains that in a block paragraph each line of the paragraph starts at the left margin. This rule is demonstrated on the board:

```
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

She then explains the rules governing the layout of an indented paragraph. Here the first line starts half an inch from the left margin. Students are told that half an inch can be measured as six spaces when they are using elite type. This rule is then demonstrated on the board:

```
      XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

The last example is that of a hanging paragraph. The teacher explains that the first line starts at the left margin and second and subsequent lines start under the third letter. This type of paragraph is also demonstrated on the board:

```
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
      XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
      XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

While the teacher is explaining and demonstrating the different layouts, all students are busily making notes for their future reference.

Theory becomes much more complicated than this as the course develops when practical exercises include the application of an increasingly wide range of rules governing the layout of letters, memoranda, forms, envelopes and information presented in statistical, tabular form. As students accumulate more and more theoretical knowledge



they are given an exercise or group of exercises to complete in which the theory can be put into practice.

While students work on these exercises the teacher moves round the classroom, commenting on students' work as they are doing it and giving them help where necessary. Sometimes a student needs assistance when the teacher is not nearby. On these occasions General Secretarial students tend to wave their arm in the air and call out 'Miss, Miss' without even looking up from their work to see where the teacher is or what she is doing. They display no inhibitions in their demand for the teacher's assistance. TOPS students, on the other hand, tend to look for the teacher first and then try to catch her eye as she finishes attending to another student. At this stage students' work is beginning to be more of an individual effort rather than a class activity; there is more of a competitive edge to classroom activities. The younger students respond to this by making urgent demands on the teacher's attention.

#### Student differentiation

When typing tasks are completed they are handed in to be marked by the teacher. Students then file away these exercises alongside their theory notes for future reference. As happens in shorthand, it very soon becomes clear that some students are able to complete tasks more quickly and with higher levels of accuracy than others. Again, an analysis of the report sent out as early as the end of the first term of the course confirms this differentiation.

The grading scheme for typing is the same as that for shorthand:

A = very good  
B = good  
C = borderline  
D = fail.

The course work grades and comments for typing described here were given to the same cohort of General Secretarial students (1985/6) as the shorthand grades and comments described earlier in the chapter. There were 21 students in the group; these were their grades for typing:

Grade A - 0 students  
Grade B - 10 students  
Grade C - 6 students  
Grade D - 4 students

One student's performance was so poor that she was awarded a grade E, despite the fact that grade E is off the scale of possible grades.

Written comments accompanying the award of grade B include praise for working 'diligently', 'conscientiously' and two students are each described as 'an industrious typist'. The student who was awarded the grade E was told that she needed to develop 'a higher standard of neatness and accuracy'. One grade D student was said to 'lack sustained concentration' and another was told she should be 'more determined to master the skills of touch typing'.

The spread of ability is as clear here as in shorthand. In the next section I describe the way in which the typing course develops after the theory has been worked through, stressing the management of the by now manifest different levels of ability within the same class.



### Preparing for the examination

As soon as theory has been mastered and practised, students begin intensive preparation for their first external examination. The classroom tasks now set are either past examination papers or text book exercises which are modelled on examination questions. These tasks aim to simulate the routine typing tasks in an office and consist mainly of amending drafts or earlier copies of such documents as letters, forms and office memoranda.

In the early stages of the course the teacher dominates from the front of the classroom and all students work at the same pace as they first learn the basic techniques of touch typing and then typing theory. The nearer students get to the examination the more the teacher's classroom role becomes that of consultant to individual students. Sometimes she leaves her position at the front of the class and moves round from desk to desk, helping and advising students as they work. For much of the time, though, she sits at the teacher's desk and students come out to her to have work marked as they complete it.

Although students are now preparing for external examinations and feel under pressure for that reason, the structure of typing lessons at this stage gives students more freedom to pace their individual efforts than does that of shorthand lessons. Although the typing teacher sets time frameworks within which certain pieces of work have to be completed, it is obvious that students pace themselves within the framework allowed by the teacher. To the observer there seemed to be

very little shape to individual lessons at this point in the course except that dictated by the clock. Some students arrived slightly earlier than the timetabled time and busily got on with their work while the rest came in more or less at the allotted time and eventually settled themselves down to typing. When the teacher arrived she would usually announce her presence to the class and make some general statement about what she expected to be achieved during the lesson. If a student finished a major piece of work within sight of the end of the time allocated for the lesson, she would usually quietly pack up and wait for the teacher to give the signal to leave. I often heard students negotiate this brief period of inactivity with the teacher and then confirm it with a student neighbour with some such formula as: 'It's not worth beginning the next piece now. I'll begin it tomorrow.' I never observed students using these legitimised periods of inactivity to disturb other students.

Where stress does occur it concerns the conflict between the different layers of rules which the typist must obey. The student is given a document, sometimes handwritten and sometimes typed, which requires amendments such as additions, deletions or more major forms of restructuring. The task then is to re-type the document following the basic theoretical rules already learned from the teacher, but also incorporating and giving priority to any potentially conflicting instructions given within the task itself. It is at this stage in the course that typing teachers have to repeat over and over again to students who query which set of rules they are to follow: 'When in



doubt, follow the instructions given'. By this they mean that the instructions for amendments to be made within the given task must override any rules that the students have previously learned from their teacher in class.

It is here that students become increasingly aware of the potential conflict between the rules which their typing teachers exhort them to follow in order to pass examinations and the rules which might apply in the work situation. Teachers have to make students aware that any office they might work in will have its own 'house rules' about such things as the layout of letters and internal memoranda. These could very well differ from the rules taught in college. It seems that the underlying lesson being taught is rule-following. Students have to learn that there are three layers of rules. First is the basic layer taught by their teachers who are following the guidelines set out by the examination board. A second layer which might over-ride these is contained in some examination questions intended to simulate the work experience where students are asked to ignore basic rules and follow instructions given in the particular examination task. Thirdly, students are repeatedly reminded that they might have to adhere to a completely different set of house rules governing the layout of typed material in any office where they might work in the future.

Shorthand and typing were chosen for close consideration since both technical skills have an obvious exchange value in the labour market. Most advertisements for office workers in the local economy ask

for specific levels of achievement in one or other, and sometimes both, of these subjects. The presence of both subjects in the formal curriculum of office skills courses is therefore amply justified by the skill demands of the labour market. Data gathered by extensive classroom observation indicate that the technical aspects of both these subjects are at the core of the teaching/learning process. However, data gathered by an analysis of students reports indicate that teachers assess students not simply on their mastery of technical skills but also on such personal attributes as diligence, neatness, accuracy, efficiency and application.

Teachers are well aware that a student's mastery of certain technical skills is valued by employers, not so much for the technical skill *per se*, but as an indicator of personal attributes. Shorthand is a prime example of this. In interview one teacher said that shorthand is 'not just a skill; not just a manual skill'. She added:

If you look at advertisements, even though they don't want shorthand-typists in the particular job, they will ask for people with shorthand because they know if they can cope with shorthand that they've got this extra bit about them, you know. It's funny. If you speak to employers they will say it's an indication of how able a person is.

Typing too has its hidden curriculum. Examination success at all levels is based on neatness, accuracy when working at speed and deference to rules.

Teachers are well aware of the importance for office workers of the hidden curriculum of social skills. While this awareness is



submerged in classroom interactions it is evident in teachers' comments on student reports. It emerges even more strongly in interview when teachers were asked to comment on individual students and their suitability for office work. These teacher typifications of students are explored later in the chapter.

I now turn to the third element of the curriculum which is given close consideration here, Office Skills/Secretarial Duties. This subject was chosen for close consideration since it stands in contrast to shorthand and typing in that it does not have such an obvious exchange value in the labour market.

#### OFFICE PRACTICE/SECRETARIAL DUTIES

Office Practice and Secretarial Duties are not exactly two separate subjects but two levels of the same subject offered for examination by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). Office practice is taken as a Stage One examination and Secretarial Duties as a Stage Two examination. These two examination levels are linked to the various office skills courses available in the the Secretarial Section. Stage One level (Office Practice) is offered to full-time students on General Secretarial courses which last for one year. Students on two year full-time courses take the Stage One examination at the end of the first year of their course and then Stage Two level (Secretarial Duties) at the end of their second year. TOPS courses only ran for one year, so students immediately moved into the Stage Two level of the subject.

At the Stage One level students are given factual descriptions of the various processes and activities that together make up the workings of a typical office. The general aim is to give students a simulated knowledge of general office tasks and routines. A large problem here, both for students and teachers, is that the majority of students have no practical experience of an office situation. In order to overcome this problem, at least in part, a specialist room has been set up in the college in which some of the material aspects of the office situation can be simulated. This room, the Training Office, contains much of the equipment that would be found in the modern office. Students are given practical experience in the use of this equipment as part of their Office Practice course.

At the Stage Two level students are expected to have the factual knowledge demanded at the Stage One level. In addition they are expected to be able to apply that knowledge to what are described by teachers of the subject at this level as 'problem solving' exercises. These exercises expect that students are able to project themselves into a problematic office situation that demands that they make decisions about the appropriate action to be taken. While some of the problems to be solved at this level test students' factual knowledge of office routines and practices, many test their appreciation of the social skills required of office workers. It is in this subject, particularly at the Stage Two level (Secretarial Duties), that social skills are overtly tested under examination conditions. As will be demonstrated shortly, it is this aspect of the examination syllabus that is skipped over quickly



by teachers. Teachers are very reluctant to admit a discussion of social skills into the classroom even when such matters are expressly a part of the examination curriculum. This exclusion of social skills from the classroom will be discussed later.

### Simulating office work

I asked one teacher, who I shall call Jane, to talk to me in interview about teaching Office Practice. I had observed her teaching Office Practice to the 1987/8 cohort of General Secretarial students and I asked her to describe what she liked about teaching the subject and what she found difficult. She began by telling me about the external examination, stressing its practical nature:

What I really like about the Office Practice paper is that it's purely practical. They give you all the information and all the forms you would use in the office and you must transfer the information accurately. That's why the subject is so activity based in the Training Office. What I particularly like about it [the examination] is that you feel you're in an office for two and a half hours getting work done.

The assumed value of Office Practice/Secretarial Duties as an element in an office skills curriculum is exactly as Jane explained it. As a subject taught and learned in the classroom it provides opportunities for the simulation of office situations and experience. Jane goes so far as to claim that the external examination also simulates the experience of being 'in an office for two and a half hours getting work done'.

Reception skills and duties form part of the syllabus at both the Office Practice and Secretarial Duties levels. One part of the Training Office is set up as a reception area. The reception desk has a phone with extensions to other phones in the room. Students took turns in role playing exercises in which one student played the part of a visitor to the firm, a second student played the part of a receptionist and a third student played the part of a secretary on one of the (supposedly) remote telephone extensions. The role playing exercise gave students the opportunity to demonstrate their social skills in greeting a visitor and using the telephone. As I observed different cohorts of both General Secretarial and TOPS students working through these exercises, they seemed to enjoy them and very rarely took advantage of any of the ample opportunities for 'mucking about' and 'playing to the gallery' that such role playing activities offer.

However, as with other elements of the formal curriculum, data drawn from interviews with teachers and students revealed criticisms of this subject which were submerged beneath the surface of classroom behaviour. Jane's perspective on the subject stands in sharp contrast to that expressed in interview by many students and even by some teachers.

A commonly held view expressed by students was that what they were learning was little more than 'common sense'. As one student said, 'Anybody knows how to answer a phone'. One TOPS student in the 1985/6 cohort dismissed the subject completely. She said:



Secretarial Duties is just a waste of time. You cannot teach somebody how to behave in an office. They've got to learn that for themselves.

In interview some teachers also expressed their doubts about the subject. They shared the view expressed by many students that much of what was being taught was 'common sense' and could be learned more effectively as they had learned it, in the real office situation.

In addition to simulation exercises such as that described above, students have to learn masses of factual information which pertain to everyday office routines. Both students and teachers complain about this aspect of the subject. From the teacher's point of view, it creates a heavy burden of preparation in making sure that factual information is up to date. Teachers regard one topic in the syllabus, Post Office Services, as being notoriously difficult in this respect. One teacher explained:

It's very, very difficult to make Post Office Services interesting. The first thing you've got to do is be up to date. So the first thing I do is to go to the Post Office and make sure that I have leaflets on all the topics I want them to know. I would also have an up to date Post Office Guide.

The comments from this teacher matched my own classroom observations. In the interview with Jane I said that while I had been observing classes, both Office Practice and Secretarial Duties, there seemed to be a great deal of factual information that had to be conveyed by the teacher and learned by heart by the students. Her immediate response was to insist that there are very few questions in the examination that rely on rote learning, but then she added:

But they've got to learn Post Office Services by heart. This is the only way. It's unrealistic because you wouldn't need to know all of that in your head. Obviously you're quicker if you do, but the reference books are always there in the office and you'd be able to go to your supervisor if in doubt.

She came back to this topic later in the interview as though she had been reflecting on it while telling me about something else. She was now more ready to admit the necessity for 'rote learning' as part of the course. This time it was explained away as part of the constraints imposed by an external examination system. She then added that in the real office situation memorised information was a useful asset even though reference books were available.

Office Practice is an external exam so there is a certain amount of rote learning. In the office you would eventually get to know all these things anyway and so you'd save time by not having to keep going to reference books. So it's not bad that they have to do a little bit of learning.

This particular syllabus topic, Post Office Services, demonstrates one of the dilemmas of transferring knowledge required in a work situation to an educational institution and then making that knowledge an examination subject. Information that would be readily available in a reference book or from a supervisor has to be taught and memorised for examination purposes. Although Jane argues that this rote learning would save time in the office, it never the less diminishes the simulation value of the subject for students.

In addition to doubts about the long term practical value of teaching and learning this element of the formal curriculum, students



also expressed doubts about whether or not employers would recognise the value of an examination qualification in the subject.

### Certification

A student in the TOPS cohort of 1985/6 raised this question directly with a teacher in class. What follows is a transcript the ensuing dialogue.

Student: If it just says Pass or Credit in Secretarial Duties on the certificate, what is the firm going to know about that?

Teacher: They are very well recognised, these Secretarial Duties exams, around this area anyway. And if you've got some skills to back up that qualification I'm sure you'd be near the top for any job.

Student: So a firm would know what Secretarial Duties involves then?

Teacher: Yes, they would. It's recognised around here because it has been going at this college for a long time and students with the qualification have found they've soon gone ahead when employers realise they have initiative and they know a bit about the workings of an office. It doesn't mean you're going to jump into a top post but employers know they're employing somebody with that ability. Yes, it's a good certificate.

The teacher's emphasis on how well known the qualification is 'around this area' did not satisfy the student since she lived about twenty miles from West Port and planned to seek employment near her home. When the student explained this the teacher added:

Well, you've got a copy of your syllabus haven't you. I think in those circumstances if I went for a job I'd send a copy of the syllabus. I mean it's up to you. People sometimes send a piece of work, don't they, to show what they can do. So it's up to you to sell yourself. If you want them to appreciate the certificate, make sure you keep a copy of the syllabus. Send it in with your certificate.

They'll know then. I think that would impress anyone. It would me. Alright?

The student answered the teacher's final question with an unconvinced 'Mmmm.'

### Social skills in the office

When I interviewed Jane about the teaching of Office Practice I took the opportunity of also asking her about the teaching of Secretarial Duties. I knew that she had taught Secretarial Duties both to TOPS students and to 17+ students who were following two year office skills courses. At this stage I had only observed TOPS students in this subject. I asked her if there were any differences between the way TOPS students and 17+ students in their second year tackled the work at the Secretarial Duties level. She said:

TOPS students of course are more mature. Usually with an initiative question the TOPS students will say 'Well, if I was in that situation I'd do this.' I find the seventeen year olds are unable to place themselves in that kind of situation.

In order to demonstrate her point she quotes a question from a recent examination paper. She describes it as 'a crazy type question; a bit of fun on the exam paper'. The question reads:

You are secretary to an estate agent and you are going to a disco on Friday night so you turn up at the office in full disco clothes on Friday morning. The estate agent comes in and says 'How dare you turn up in my office dressed like that? Don't ever let it happen again.' Next week there is still a strained atmosphere in the office from the Friday incident. How would you cope with this?



She explains that a mature student would probably 'be able to work her way through this', implying that a satisfactory answer to suit the demands and purpose of the examination would be concocted. She suggests that the response from a 17 year old student might not so readily satisfy examination requirements and would more likely be something like, 'To hell with this job'. She adds 'They [the examiners] don't want that kind of answer'.

This prompted me to ask if there was anything in the examination syllabus indicating that students need to learn how to handle situations of this kind. She reached for a copy of the syllabus and said:

Yes. Here we are. Syllabus topic: Personal Qualities. It says: 'Demonstrate and exercise the use of courtesy, diplomacy, anticipation, loyalty, reliability and initiative.' Here's another section: 'Assess inter-personal behaviour in given situations and suggest appropriate solutions employing tact and diplomacy. Sense the appropriate modes of dress and manner of address in given situations. Appreciate the need for adaptability according to your chief's personality to achieve a personal yet professional working relationship.'

She added that she usually covered these sections of the syllabus in one lesson. I had never seen this particular teacher in action in a Secretarial Duties class, but the practice of getting these sections of the syllabus over as quickly as possible was confirmed by my observation of the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students who were taught the subject by a different teacher.

It is topics such as these that mark the distinction between Office Practice and Secretarial Duties. Familiarity with technical

aspects of office routines and practices such as ways of receiving, storing and retrieving information is at the core of the Office Practice course. At the Secretarial Duties level, students are expected to be familiar with these technical details at the descriptive level. They are also expected to be able to apply this knowledge to the solving of day-to-day problems which might also call for the exercising of social skills.

These social skills are set within a framework of loyalty, courtesy, diplomacy and tact. Deference to the 'boss' and subjugation of the 'self' is always expected. I observed a Secretarial Duties lesson with the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students in which a past examination question was given for general discussion. As part of her answer to the question one student began by saying, 'Well, I would tell the boss...' Her answer was interrupted by the teacher saying:

No, no. You never tell the boss anything. You might suggest or propose something, but you never tell him (sic) what to do. You must always try to make it look as though he had the idea, not you.

It was only in rare and brief moments such as this that the power relations of the office entered into classroom discourse. The student whose answer had been interrupted simply looked slightly surprised and amended her answer in the way suggested by the teacher. The teacher's statement went unchallenged.

In classrooms in this setting social skills are submerged beneath an overt emphasis on technical skills. In subjects such as shorthand and



typing it is the technical nature of such skills that are emphasised in classroom practices. In Secretarial Duties the examination syllabus includes a section on 'Personal Qualities' but, as has been demonstrated, this aspect of the syllabus is dealt with as quickly as possible. Even in this subject, which gives teachers a legitimate space in which to open up the discussion of social skills, it is technical knowledge which is given most emphasis in the classroom even though teachers recognise that such knowledge can rapidly become out-dated and need not be memorised in the work situation. However, teachers do not assess students on technical skills alone.

Outside the classroom and away from face to face contact with students, teachers readily place great emphasis on social skills in their assessment of students' suitability for office work. It has already been demonstrated that on student reports teachers mix comments on achievement in technical skills with comments on personal attributes. In interview, when asked to discuss students' suitability for office work, teachers place even more emphasis on the importance of social skills and personal attributes. Before examining some of these teacher typifications of students, it is necessary to give some account of the world of office work and its internal structures.

#### THE LADDER OF OPPORTUNITY

Teachers on the office skills courses describe a hierarchy of office work for women; most of them worked their way upwards through the various levels of it. At the lowest rung of the ladder is the junior

clerk; at the top rung is the private secretary. This is how one teacher, Joanne, described the various steps up the ladder.

She began with the junior clerk, a position which she herself held when she first left school at 16. She said:

These people [junior clerks] would possibly start in the mail room of a firm by taking round mail, making coffee, putting letters in envelopes. Then they might start to answer the phone and do a bit of filing.

In addition to simply learning how to carry out these tasks Joanne explained that the junior clerk would be '...generally getting to know what the firm's about, who people are'.

On the next rung of the ladder is the junior copy typist or clerk/typist. Joanne explained what would be involved in moving up to this second rung:

Then they'd be given most of the simple copy typing to do that needed to be done and chores like photo-copying. They'd still probably be meant to answer the phone. At this stage she would start doing some checking of other people's typing because it's not easy to see mistakes in your own work.

The next rung of the ladder above that is the audio-typist or shorthand typist. Here Joanne added some details from her own past experience.

I found that as an audio-typist or shorthand typist you usually worked for several people in a department therefore you would have a variety of work. It would involve doing some audio-typing from tapes or taking some shorthand from people. At this stage you would be expected to be doing about 80 wpm shorthand, Stage II audio-typing, which is a reasonable speed because people don't sit there and dictate continually, they tend to stop and think. Possibly you might, once you got used to the work, have the



responsibility of composing simple letters when you get to know the rules of the house because each firm presents its rules in a certain manner. Once they get to know all these things they would know about the routine content of letters, standard letters that would be sent out. So they might be told 'Send these letters out' but nothing too involved. I would say that would more likely be the work of a shorthand typist.

On the next rung of the ladder, as she put it, is '... the secretary' (her emphasis). She continued at length to describe the skills and tasks that would be expected of a secretary. Although a high level of technical skills are expected, it is on this very top rung of the ladder that social skills play a more prominent part in defining the competent office worker. In summing up this combination of technical and social skills Joanne said of the secretary, 'She's got to be a paragon of virtue. She's got to have the lot.'

She continued by first describing the technical skills required at this level:

She would have to have top notch skills. You'd expect her to have Stage III typing, Stage II audio-typing (there is a Stage III but I don't think it's ever been done here), word-processing skills of course now and I would say 120 wpm shorthand. They might perhaps accept 100 but I wouldn't feel comfortable unless I had 120. And of course audio-typing because the boss might dictate.

Although this impressive array of technical skills is expected in a secretary, they are not all necessarily used in her day-to-day work. As Joanne explained:

You would probably find at this stage she wouldn't use all the skills, certainly the skill of typing as much because she would tend to delegate the work to others. She would be responsible for doing all the confidential typing for the boss and the important typing otherwise anything else she

would dish out to the shorthand typist. She generally organises the boss so she's going to have a lot of confidential work to do.

Then she came to some of the more obvious of the social skills required of an employee who has access to confidential material:

She's certainly got to be a person who doesn't gossip. Even if she was very friendly with the shorthand typist she's got to be absolutely loyal and keep everything quiet that she hears or sees. It's surprising what you have access to as a secretary.

Then Joanne moved on to describe some of the tasks that are frequently associated with the 'office wife' aspects of the secretary's work. The purpose of the majority of these tasks is to smooth the boss's journey, literally and metaphorically, through the daily routine. Again, Joanne spoke from her own past experience. She said that a secretary has got to be '...a good organiser', adding by way of explanation that '...bosses need to be organised'. She described how she kept a diary for herself and for her boss, first pencilling in appointments and then later either making them firm or re-arranging them. She also explained that a secretary has to be knowledgeable about different modes of travel and capable of '...ordering taxis, booking flights, trains, a coach - whatever way he might choose to travel.' Then she listed the more personal level of care and attention that a secretary would have to give to her boss:

She would even go to the extent, if he has to go to dinner with someone, to find out whether he ought to take a dress suit with him and whether she ought to order an orchid for his wife. It's absolutely unbelievable what you'd go into. I've even found myself sewing a button on the boss's coat as he was going away somewhere. You could be asked to do absolutely anything.



Finally she described the need for a good secretary to have a flexible attitude to working hours, regardless of commitments in her domestic life. She said:

And also you've got to be prepared to work overtime at a minute's notice, if he [the boss] suddenly realises he's got to go off the next day. Many a time I've rung my husband up and said I've got to stay on and that's it. You find people give and take. If you do that and then ask for half a day off later, that's OK. But you have to be prepared to do this.

In a later chapter I use life history data to demonstrate the way in which two other teachers in the study climbed up the ladder that Joanne describes here. While they too place emphasis on the importance of technical skills, their accounts support that of Joanne in that they recognise the increasing importance of social skills as progress is made up the ladder.

In this particular interview with Joanne I was concerned to establish how long it might take an individual to ascend the ladder that she had described. She began:

I would say an average time would be junior clerk six months to a year. Possibly copy typist for another year.

Then the ladder concept disappeared completely when she said '...the majority of people stay there for ever.' According to Joanne, it is not technical skills that affect promotion beyond this stage. She explained:

According to your personality you could stay a shorthand typist for ever. I'm trying to think what else makes a secretary. Obviously appearance to a certain extent. I mean you have got to meet people. I find too as secretary, this sounds awful, but you have to be somebody that other people can respect and look up to. You've been through the office situation so they have seen you as a junior working up

through then you're the one to turn round and give other people work. So you have to be able to do this without them resenting it. You have to try to be fair to everyone and human.

At this point she laughed and said, 'With all the qualities you need to be a secretary, I don't think anyone could ever be a perfect one.' She realised that she was indeed describing 'a paragon of virtue' as she had put it earlier in the interview.

Teachers also recognise that some students might enter the labour market at a higher point on the ladder than others. They readily distinguished between the expected point of entry of the mature TOPS students with that of 16+ General Secretarial students. The former would be expected to begin as audio-typists or shorthand typists whereas the latter would begin on the first rung of the ladder. Technical skills are thus necessary but not a sufficient requirement for promotion to the top rung of the office work ladder.

However, it is technical skills that receive emphasis in the classroom. Although teachers are aware of the importance of social skills, particularly at the higher levels of the ladder of opportunity, they seem not to regard training in the development of these skills as part of their task in the classroom. In the next section of the chapter I analyse data gathered in an informal interview with one teacher, Joanne, who had been asked to describe the ability of students in the 1986/7 TOPS cohort and what she thought of their suitability for office



work. This teacher's typifications of TOPS students as 'secretarial material' are described in the following section.

### SECRETARIAL MATERIAL?

In Joanne's assessment of Mo's potential for the higher levels of office work, we can clearly see the tension between a student's ability in technical skills and what Joanne calls 'attitude'. She says:

Mo did very well. As you know she came from factory work and she took to typing straight away. She was fast and she passed both exams with distinction (Stage I typing and audio-typing). She was ill when they took Stage II and so had to take it in the summer but she should get it. She did very well, perhaps one of the best. There was still something about her, though, that in my mind would stop her being secretarial calibre and probably at times it was her attitude again. Most of the time she was perfectly OK but I've got an idea that towards the end she might have taken advantage and skived. For about three quarters of the course her heart was really in it and she worked really hard but towards the end....But then she worked quicker than the others so whether she was a bit bored I don't know. I would employ her, though, as a good shorthand typist. I wouldn't put her as secretarial calibre.

This student clearly has the technical skills necessary for higher level office work, but in Joanne's estimation she is not of 'secretarial calibre'. Although Mo did 'very well' in her attainment of technical skills, there was still 'something about her' that Joanne considered a barrier to the higher levels of employment.

This same tension is also apparent in Joanne's description of another student, Julia. Although Julia is described as being 'the brightest' on the course and 'a good worker', Joanne is not confident that she is 'the secretarial type'. She says of this student:



I suppose overall, and the results show it, that Julia was perhaps the brightest on the course. She didn't make a very good start. She was worried at the beginning that she wasn't going to like typing. This sometimes happens with bright people; they think typing is a mundane thing to do. But as the work became more of a challenge she enjoyed it more. Although she was bright and good she was rather untidy and that could let her down. Again although I'm saying she was the brightest, as far as the skills she had to learn at college were concerned, I'm still not sure that I would put her as the secretarial type. I'm certain with her brightness she'll pass the exams but she was untidy, I'd put that against her and also I thought she was too outspoken. This would go against her. She might fit in with the right type of person but wouldn't fit into any secretarial job. She was pleasant enough. Perhaps it was her age, but she could be quite crude at times; but she'd make a good shorthand typist. I'm not even sure if I was a boss I'd want her in my office because she's still a bit young and at times she doesn't know where to stop but she'd make a good worker if she was in the right place.

It is clearly Julia's personal attributes, the fact that she is 'untidy', 'outspoken' and 'quite crude at times', that make Joanne hesitate to describe her as 'the secretarial type'.

Another student, Elspeth, is described as having the technical skills necessary to make 'a good shorthand typist', but is thought to be too 'blunt'. Just as Julia will have to find 'the right place' where her personal deficiencies will be overlooked, so Elspeth will 'have to go where she fits in'. Joanne says of her:

She is a typical northerner, very blunt, says exactly what she means. She should pass audio and typing; she was better at composing letters than quite a few. I liked her but at the same time she was so blunt and she thought she ought to have attention all the time when you were giving it to other people; that became a bit of a nuisance. I found her pleasant in spite of the bluntness; I quite liked her and I would employ her. I admired her because she had some terrific problems with her marriage, but she soon bounced back and it didn't affect her work a lot. I would employ her because I felt I could get on with her but I don't think everybody could. She's going to have to go where she fits



in. Secretarial type? Mmmmmmm. No, not really. A good shorthand typist.

At the opposite end of the technical skills spectrum is Jean, a student described as 'an extremely pleasant person' but who lacked technical skills. Joanne says of this student:

I found Jean an extremely pleasant person. She did have time off for illness but she came back quite quickly and I think she was quite ill. She came back as soon as she could. When she was there she wasn't very able but she worked to the best of her ability at all times. I was pleased that she passed her Stage I and audio because she might very well not have done. I hope she gets her Stage II, but she's never going to make more than a very mediocre shorthand typist. I can't imagine that if she came here until she was 80 she would get Stage III [typing] and 120 [words per minute in shorthand]. But I would employ her readily to do mediocre tasks. I liked Jean and she was very grateful for anything that was done for her.

Being 'an extremely pleasant person' cannot compensate for lack of technical skills. Jean's personality makes her eminently employable, but only in the performance of 'mediocre tasks'.

In addition to personal qualities, teachers also assess the suitability of students for office work on the way in which they dress. I explained in Chapter Three that dress rules for students on office skills courses are not explicitly set out. Teachers prefer to demonstrate the preferred style of dress by their own example. During the life-time of the study dress only once became an issue in the classroom. In interview, though, teachers readily comment on the suitability or otherwise of students' dress and personal cleanliness. In the interview with Joanne from which the data used here are drawn, she

compared the dress of the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students with that of the 1986/7 cohort. She said:

Last year most of them seemed to think they had to dress up to come to college; they nearly all wore jeans this year.

This concern for standards of dress and general appearance are made clear in Joanne's comments on Sheila, a student in the 1986/7 cohort of TOPS students. She began by saying:

I would say Sheila was the odd bod of the group. She lacked confidence. She really was quite good and in spite of her unkempt appearance her work was very neat. I would be most surprised if she didn't get her Stage II [typing]. I'm not sure if she'd be capable of Stage III.

Sheila is thus identified as a student who is 'quite good' and whose typing skills are on the borderline between Stage II and III. Her 'unkempt appearance' is not reflected in her work. In spite of her attainment in technical skills, however, Joanne considers that Sheila's unkempt appearance renders her suitable only for work where she is out of sight. She says of her:

She was untidy, her nails were dirty, lots of things you would expect to be better for secretarial work....If she was in an office where nobody could see her and I could just hand the work to her I'd be quite pleased to employ her. She would make a good job of any typing work she did.

Sheila's technical skills are valued but, in Joanne's opinion, her general appearance would debar her from higher levels of employment particularly where her 'unkempt appearance' could be seen.

It is clear that the hidden curriculum of social skills plays a large part in teacher assessments of students' suitability for the



various levels of office work. In spite of this, it is the teaching and learning of technical skills which are given high salience in the classroom. Even where the formal curriculum allows space for discussion of the social skills required of office workers, as it does in Secretarial Duties, these opportunities are skipped over by teachers. Students, too, do not value the opportunity to learn such skills outside the work situation. The TOPS student quoted earlier in the chapter said:

You cannot teach somebody how to behave in an office.  
They've got to learn that for themselves.

Many of the teachers in the secretarial section share this view.

Teachers are also called on to write references for students as they begin to apply for jobs towards the end of their course. This is what one teacher had to say about the problem she faced in writing a reference for a TOPS student in the 1986/7 cohort. The student's technical skills were adequate for the post but her social skills were not. The teacher explains:

Kate has applied for the post but I don't think she'll get it. We had the request for the reference come through and it was very well worded because you couldn't omit anything. They specifically listed about six things under 'character' and you had to answer. And the same thing with 'ability'. The job specification was very detailed. We had to be truthful; I think you have to be. Sometimes you can leave out things that aren't asked but they were definitely asked here and so you had to be very truthful. So I don't think she'd get the job on the reference. I think we'd be doing her an injustice to say that she could do it, because I think after about a week she'd be absolutely in a flat spin.

In interview teachers frequently cite the ability to work under pressure as an essential attribute in an office worker, particularly at the higher levels. Although Kate had the technical skills required in the

post for which she applied, it was considered that she lacked the ability to remain calm when under pressure. Although the teacher is well aware of Kate's deficiency in this essential respect, she found it difficult to be 'truthful' to the extent of explicitly stating this in a reference.

Within the boundaries of the classroom, teachers give high priority to the teaching and assessing of technical skills. Assessments of, and comments on, a student's social skills and personal attributes are kept at a distance from teacher/student interactions in the classroom.

This does not mean that teachers are unaware of the hidden curriculum embodied in the attainment of technical skills. Teachers' comments on student reports make it clear that they consider high attainment in skill subjects such as shorthand and typing demands that students are 'conscientious' and 'industrious' and can display such qualities 'neatness', 'accuracy' and 'efficiency' in the execution of their work.

It is clear from data gathered in interviews with teachers that they consider social skills to be an important part of the office worker's repertoire of skills, particularly at the higher levels. As has been demonstrated, teachers can readily assess a student's social skills and make a judgement on how far these will enhance or limit her prospects in the labour market.



## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I set out to unravel the tangled web of the formal curriculum of technical skills and the hidden curriculum of social skills and assess the part played by each in the preparation of General Secretarial and TOPS students for office work. The data used in this chapter make it clear that, within the classroom, emphasis is placed on the attainment of technical skills. The assessment of social skills is subdued in the classroom, but emerges in extra-classroom statements made by teachers such as comments made on student reports and in references provided for potential employers.

Students share their teachers' view that technical skills should form the core of classroom practice. Although many students recognise that certain social skills are necessary for progress up the ladder of opportunity, they are of the opinion that these skills are better learned in the office than in the classroom. Thus teacher and student perspectives converge on what should constitute the basis of the classroom encounter. In the following two chapters I explore these student and teacher perspectives in more detail.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONFORMIST STUDENTS?



Clerical work is currently regarded as being 'quintessentially feminine' (Pringle, 1989:3), but until the end of the nineteenth century it was very largely a male occupation. Historical analysis of the labour process in the office has demonstrated how clerical work has gradually been transformed from being 'men's work' to 'women's work' since the end of the nineteenth century (Crompton and Jones, 1984; McNally, 1979; Walby, 1986; Zimmeck, 1986).

The feminisation of the clerical labour force during this century has been statistically expressed in different ways. Walby records that there was an enormous increase in the proportion of clerical workers who were women between the years 1870 and 1914. Between the years 1901 and 1911 the number of female clerical workers increased by 110% while that of male clerical workers increased only by 17% (Walby, 1986:144). Crompton and Jones record that in 1901 women made up 13.4% of clerical workers and by 1951 this figure had increased to 59.6% (Crompton and Jones, 1984:19). Another way of expressing the same phenomenon is provided by Routh (1980) who records that in 1951 male clerical workers represented 143% of the 1911 census figures for this occupational category whereas female clerical workers represented 787% of the 1911 figures (Routh, 1980, quoted in Crompton and Jones, 1984:19). No matter how the phenomenon is expressed statistically, the feminisation of the clerical labour force is as remarkable as it is

unmistakable. The modern office has provided an expanding employment arena for women this century.

However, this is not to say that men have disappeared from the office. Clear boundaries exist between 'men's work' and 'women's work' within the office world. In the modern office women are concentrated in certain employment categories such as those of secretary, typist and receptionist. Men, on the other hand, occupy higher grades which are more usually connected to promotion ladders within the organisation. Although office work has provided expanding employment opportunities for women this century, there exists an almost impermeable barrier to the possibility of advancement from the lower to the higher levels of such work. As Walby argues: 'A typist could not expect to be promoted to positions of authority in the office however well she typed' (Walby, 1986:153).

Why then do female students enrol on office skills courses? What motivates them? What are their ambitions for the future? In order to answer these questions I draw on data gathered in interviews with both groups of students and data collected as written answers to questionnaires administered to General Secretarial students. In the analysis of these data, wide differences between mature students following TOPS courses and 16+ students following General Secretarial courses became apparent.



## MOTIVATION

For all the mature students in the study, embarking on the course marked a positive decision on their part to change the direction of their lives. They are at a pivotal point in their lives which has given them the ability to analyse their past with an almost clinical precision and detachment. In interview they readily reflect on their lives so far. They comment on past weaknesses, failures, mistakes or opportunities lost in a variegated life pattern which includes early education, labour market experience and, for most of them, marriage and children. From this basis of reflection and self-awareness they are actively constructing a new identity. These women have a clear eye on long term goals and they experience a sense of power and control over their future.

In sharp contrast to the mature students, the younger school-leavers in the study are not certain of their employment (or life-in-general) future. For a surprisingly large number of them the General Secretarial course was not a first choice. Some had wanted to follow the Nursery Nurses (NNEB) course and train to be a nanny, but failed to reach the entry qualifications required. Some do not expect to do office work when they have completed the course, except perhaps as a short term measure. Some are simply following the course because they recognise the value of qualifications that in some vague, unspecified way might 'come in useful'. 'Uncertainty' is the key word to explain how these young women feel about their future.

The differences outlined here between the two groups of students led me to describe the mature students as being at a 'revolutionary' stage of their lives and the 16+ school leavers at an 'evolutionary' stage. These differences are explored more fully below; I begin with the mature, 'revolutionary' students.

## MATURE STUDENTS

In reflecting on their past and considering their reasons for joining the course, most TOPS students began by giving an account of themselves when they were at school. This was usually followed by a description of their first steps into the labour market. The dominant theme in student responses to questions about this early period of their life is one of waste. By far the largest number of students in both TOPS cohorts felt that they had wasted their time at school by not bothering about qualifications and career plans. For these students, the main reason for enrolling on the course was therefore to capitalise on previously wasted ability, gain some qualifications and so improve on their current working conditions. A smaller number of students in both cohorts felt that, although they did work hard at school and so left with qualifications that reflected their ability, they had not fully capitalised on these qualifications. These students therefore enrolled on the course in order to gain new qualifications and, like the group of students just identified, improve their working conditions.

### Wasted ability

I begin with an account of wasted schooldays from Jessica, a student in



the 1986/7 TOPS cohort. I had spoken to her informally on the day she came into college for interview in the July before the course began. She was 22, married with no children. Immediately on leaving school she joined a YTS course, but since completing it she had worked as a machinist in a local factory that made women's underclothes for Marks and Spencer. She had told me that her husband had encouraged her to join the course. In a subsequent interview I reminded Jessica of this and asked her how her husband now felt about her being on the course. She said:

He's still very supportive. He helps me with my homework. We've always got shorthand homework and he helps me with that. I think he'll be glad when it's all over though. On the whole he's very good about it and is pleased I've come on the course and that I'm doing well. I'm not as thick as I thought I was.

She then went on to describe how, at school, she had gradually lost interest in schoolwork and 'got in with the wrong crowd'.

I've never had a very high opinion of myself. When I was at primary school I was considered to be the brainiest in the family, but as I got older I couldn't be bothered to work and so I just went downhill. My opinion of myself just dropped, so I've got to build it up again. When I see the girls I used to know at school and they've been to university or they're teaching, I think I could have been like that.

EB What happened to you at school?

I just got in with the wrong crowd, basically, and I couldn't be bothered to do anything about it. We were more interested in having a smoke and going out with the boys. Once you get in with the wrong crowd, it's hard to get out.

In her early years in secondary school Jessica had been a member of a group of girls known as the 'snobs'. Jessica then said she moved out of the 'snobs' group and into what she had earlier described as 'the wrong crowd'. Members of this group were known as the 'troublemakers'. I asked if life in school had been more fun with this group. She said: 'Not really. It was just a way of getting people to expect less of you'.

Jessica's journey from the bright primary school pupil to a deviant group of under-achieving adolescent 'troublemakers' is well documented in the sociological literature on pupil responses to schooling, particularly when it is working class boys who are the focus of the research. What is not so well documented is what happens to these pupils (both male and female) later in life [1]. Jessica's next words reflect a view of the course as a 'second chance'; this view is common to all the TOPS students:

I think it's really good that we've been given a chance to do this course. It's not very often you get a second chance.

EB Is that how you regard the course, as a second chance?

Yes, I do. I made a mess of my life when I left school. I left without taking any exams...well, no...I took exams but I didn't bother to do any work for them. I feel I really let myself down when I was at school.

Jessica blames herself for lack of qualifications and the years spent as a machinist in sweat shop conditions. One of the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students had worked in the same factory. In interview this student had graphically described the conditions there. Machinists were paid on a 'piece rate' basis. They worked on one particular garment



until it became obvious that they were so proficient that they could turn out large numbers of the garment in a short time. At this point they were then switched to work on a different garment, so slowing down their productivity rate and the amount of money they could earn.

The theme of wasted ability is repeated in interview with Valerie, also a student in the 1986/7 cohort. She is in her early thirties, married with two children. Unlike Jessica, she did not associate with 'the wrong crowd', but simply saw no point in worrying about qualifications since jobs were readily available for unskilled school-leavers in those days.

Against the advice of her teachers Valerie left school at Easter in her fifth year and so took no examinations. She explains:

I just wanted to get out. My teachers said I could have got at least five 'A' grade passes at 'O' level. They tried to talk me into staying to take the exams but I refused. But then there were jobs around and there seemed no point in staying on. Today there's no option for youngsters but to stay on and try and get something behind them. I had three jobs set up before I left school, picked one of them and left that after a couple of weeks. I went into another one, stayed there about two months. Then I went to another one. There was no gap in between, it was straight from one to the other. I had no long term plan; I don't think you do when you're that age. Looking back now I regret leaving school, but at the time you don't think about it, you just do what's...in your mind at the time.

I asked Valerie to describe the jobs that she had when she first left school. She said:

Oh god (laughs)...I had lots of jobs. I worked in shops, in an office, I worked as a nanny on a farm, holiday camps which was good fun, and in pubs.

This freedom of movement between one unskilled job and another and the 'fun' element associated with such freedom is a theme that is frequently repeated in interviews with other TOPS students in Valerie's age group.

Both Jessica and Valerie look regretfully at the past and are now in a position to be aware of lost opportunities. Jessica compares her present working conditions with those of her now graduate contemporaries, the 'snobs'. Valerie cherishes dreams of what she might have been had she stayed on at school and developed her intellectual interests more fully. She is one of the few TOPS students in the 1986/7 cohort who enjoys book-keeping. She says:

I like book-keeping. I'm probably the only one who's said that. I really enjoy it and would like more of it. I would really love to be an accountant. I should have stayed on at school because I love anything mathematical. I've asked to go to an accountant's office on my work experience. If I could get in somewhere like that, you've got a chance of learning the rest of it.

Implicit in her next statement, though, is the realisation that she has missed the opportunity to become a qualified accountant and will now have to settle for something less than that. She knows that she wants to do office work, but feels that she will be able to choose what kind of work within this broad category will suit her. She says:

I certainly don't want a job with shorthand. I don't want to work for a solicitor. I wouldn't mind working in the Police Station. I want something that's varied. I don't just want...I don't want to be in a big office with lots of other people all sitting at a typewriter. I'd rather work in a smaller office where there's lots of different things to be done.



It is very largely this high element of choice within office work that makes it attractive to many students. This is a point to which I will return later.

Both Jessica and Valerie left school with no qualifications. Jessica blames herself for getting in with 'the wrong crowd' and Valerie considers that the conditions of the labour market at the time she left school gave her no incentive to stay on for the extra term required to take examinations. Jessica now regards the TOPS course as 'a second chance'. In interview data used later in the chapter, it is clear that Valerie realises that in order to broaden her labour market choices she has to 'come on a course like this' and 'get something behind' her. Both students, as do many others, regard the TOPS course and the opportunities it holds out to them as a chance to make up for opportunities lost in the past.

### Frustrated ability

In contrast to Jessica and Valerie I now consider Faith and Pat, TOPS students who left school well qualified with GCE 'O' levels. Both are in their mid-thirties. Faith is recently divorced and has two children at school. Pat has two school-age children from her first marriage and is going through the process of divorcing her second husband.

When I asked Faith about her school days she began with a sigh and then said, 'It's the same old story, isn't it'. She came from a Roman Catholic family and attended a local Convent school. She took seven GCE

'O' levels, passed them all, had an interview at a teacher training college and was offered a place. This was in the early 1970s when it was still possible to gain a place on a Certificate course in a teacher training college based on the results of GCE 'O' level examinations. The problem for many students then was to fill the time gap between 'O' levels and the time of college entry.

Faith expands on her 'same old story' theme:

My father was very upset about it because I did all my 'O' levels and got them all - seven. He wanted me to go to teacher training college. I had the interview and everything and I just decided I wasn't going to go. I got engaged just after that and married when I was quite young. I think I just took the easy way out to be honest. I wish I'd got my career first and then settled down.

Faith now regrets having put marriage before career interests, regarding this as 'the easy way out'. She clearly blames herself for not having made the most of her school qualifications and repeats later in the interview: 'I just wish I'd had my career behind me before I settled down and got married'.

Pat also left school well qualified with six GCE 'O' levels. She really wanted to go into journalism, but her father insisted that she went into a bank. Unlike Faith, she did not put marriage before a career at that stage in her life but encountered gender inequalities in the bank's structure of opportunities. She says:

I had my six 'O' levels and I started in the bank the same day as a boy who had one 'O' level in Woodwork or something like that. I'll never forget the resentment I felt because Roger never had to do the running around in the office that I had to do. I knew you had to start at the bottom and work your way up and it was good discipline, but Roger was never



made to do the things that I was made to do. It was 'Pat, go and make the tea' or 'Pat, go out and get the biscuits'. One day I turned round to the manager and said 'Why can't Roger make the tea?'. There was a terrible row and he said, 'Miss Lee, would you care to come into my office'. When I kept on insisting that Roger should make the tea sometimes because we started together and were both being trained, he then said 'Don't you realise that girls are only in the bank until they get married, just to fill in the time?' That made my blood boil.

Pat's resentment was not simply based on the fact that she was carrying out the domestic chores of the office and Roger wasn't. She was also increasingly aware that he was being 'pushed along' and given experience of the different aspects of work in the bank. She was also aware of the fact that boys were allowed day-release with their fees paid in order to study for the various banking examinations, whereas girls had to do it 'under their own steam' by correspondence course or at evening classes.

She speaks of one woman in the bank who was regarded as a 'heroine' because she studied for the banking examinations in her own time. Pat adds 'She was well into her 30s by the time she got the exams, but she never got promotion.' After a time Pat moved into another bank with more progressive attitudes towards women employees and a more enlightened manager. She eventually married and continued to work there full-time for two years until she was pregnant. She then realised that any career prospects she might have had in the bank would have to come to an end. There were no maternity leave conditions at that time. Women with children were not even taken back full-time after the birth of

their children, although they were asked (as Pat later was) to do temporary part-time counter work to fill in for absent staff.

From very different beginnings, these four women eventually came to share the experience of being students on a TOPS office skills course at Riverbank College. What they have in common now is the desire to achieve qualifications that will enable them to enter the labour market as office workers. They readily accept that the prime purpose of the course is the attainment of technical skills. In the desire to gain marketable skills and qualifications, these students might not seem to be very much different from mature male students who are given 'a second chance'. However, as was argued in Chapter Four, the participation of the majority of women in the labour market is more complex than that of the majority of men. At some time in their adult lives, most women have to strike a balance between a demand on their labour in the domestic sphere and any desire or need they might have to participate in the public sphere of paid employment. I now consider the impact of the sexual division of labour on the employment patterns and ambitions of the TOPS students.

#### Paid and unpaid labour

The work of Dex (1987) in her analysis of the Women and Employment Survey was used in Chapter Four to demonstrate the 'M'-shaped profile or bi-modal pattern of women's participation in the labour market. The pattern identified by Dex is reflected in the work history patterns of the teachers in the study. It is also reflected in the work history



patterns of those TOPS students who are married and have children. As I have already stated, embarking on the course marked a positive decision on the part of the mature students to change the direction of their lives. Without exception, all of these students had the strong desire to change some aspect of what they had already experienced, either in paid employment or domestic life or some combination of both elements of their lives. In all cases, embarking on the course was a consequence of their sense of dissatisfaction with the present and their ambition to create a more desirable future.

We have already seen that Faith regrets having put marriage before career interests, now regarding this decision as 'the easy way out'. She clearly blames herself for not having made the most of her school qualifications and career opportunities. Later in the interview she repeats the point: 'I just wish I'd had my career behind me before I settled down and got married'. This juggling of domestic responsibilities and career interests poses a problem for most women, but relatively few men. In Pat's case, the bank's policy on the training and employment of staff demonstrates the longevity of the view that women should not combine marriage or motherhood with full-time paid employment. The example of the 'heroine' quoted by Pat illustrates the deeply entrenched prejudice that can exist against single women even when they have acquired the qualifications necessary for promotion.

Valerie and Jessica were earlier cited as examples of TOPS students who are anxious to improve their present working conditions by

gaining marketable qualifications. They differ in that Jessica has no children whereas Valerie has two children aged 11 and 7. The job mobility between one unskilled job and another that Valerie described earlier and the associated 'fun' element ended for her after she married and had children. Now she has two young children to care for, some unskilled employment options are closed to her. She says:

I liked working in a pub but I can't go back to that. Now the children are growing up I don't want to go back to working night-times in a pub and there's no pub in town that's busy enough to take on staff who only want to work in the middle of the day.

Valerie's desire to find paid employment that will enable her to give adequate time to her child-care responsibilities is a theme repeated both by TOPS students and their teachers.

However, Valerie is discriminating in her present search for employment. There are some job opportunities readily available to married women with young children. After the birth of her second child Valerie began work with Hilltop Preserves in West Port, known locally as the 'jam factory'. The shift arrangements of 9 to 12 and 12 to 3 are such that it makes it possible for women with young children who live locally to combine this work with child care. Valerie considers that the rate of pay, £2.50 an hour, is 'about the best paid work for married women in town'. 'But', she adds with a laugh, 'it's not something I want to do for the rest of my life'. She continues:

I've been fed up with the jam factory for ages. I've worked there since my youngest was 18 months old, on and off, because the work is seasonal. I'm just fed up with it.



Valerie is aware that the qualifications she will gain on the TOPS course will give her access to the kind of work she would really like to do. She says:

I've been trying for office work for some time but you can't get anything unless you've been on this course. I've got no exam passes behind me, my little bit of experience in an office was years ago, so I felt I just had no chance. The only chance is to come on a course like this and get something behind you.

Valerie has aspirations beyond the convenient and relatively well paid conditions of employment at the jam factory. As she says, it is not something she wants to do for the rest of her life.

Valerie's marriage is stable, as is that of Jessica and many of the other students on the TOPS courses. However, for some students, an unstable or recently dissolved marriage has provided the stimulus to join the course. The two most acute cases in this category are those of Beverley and Maggy. Both were involved in divorce proceedings while they were students; Beverley on the 1985/6 course and Maggy on the 1986/7 course.

Beverley is in her mid-20s with three children aged 9, 5 and 4. As she puts it: 'I missed my chance really. I did a very silly thing and got myself pregnant while I was still at school.' Beverley was in the top group at school and intending to take eight GCE 'O' levels. She became pregnant in her fourth year at school. She was therefore only able to take the two subjects that were assessed on an examination-only basis that she and the rest of her group took at the end of the fourth

year. The other six subjects were assessed on the basis of course work and an examination taken at the end of the fifth year, so Beverley was deprived of the opportunity to take these subjects. In her interview, Beverley makes several references to her high ambitions for the future.

Looking back, I thought 'I want a career'. I don't see why I shouldn't have a career. I'm only young. I'm only 25 now. I want a career and the only way I can get a career is to come into college, have good qualifications and go in somewhere. When I've got back into the pattern of going out every day, I expect to go to the top.

The solicitor who is dealing with her divorce proceedings has given her some advice about the kind of work she ought to be looking for. She says:

I was talking to my solicitor and he said 'If you're going to earn the money and you're going to go up the ladder, industry is the only place you're going to do it'. With solicitors and estate agents and these small businesses all you have is your top man, your solicitor or what have you, and then you just have your secretaries. He told me 'If you want the money and you want to go up the ladder you've got to go into industry'.

Beverley's fierce ambition is summed up in her final comment in the interview: 'I am very determined. This course is really just a stepping stone to something bigger'.

This determination is not simply a product of Beverley's appreciation of her own wasted ability, but is combined with a desire to make what she regards as more adequate provision for her three children. She says:

I have to think of my future but I have to think of their future too. It's combining the two, you see'.



This adequacy is partly financial. Beverley describes how she has to 'scrimp' in order to buy such necessities as coats for the children and how she has never been able to afford an annual holiday. But adequacy of provision for her children is also partly defined by status. As she says:

And it would be nice to have a good job for them to feel....(pause). I don't care what anybody says, a stigma is still attached to one-parent families. And just for the children to be able to think 'Well, my mother, she may not be married to and living with my Dad any more but at least my Mum's got a better job than yours.' This is what children go by, you see.

Beverley makes disparaging comments on friends whose marriages have broken up and who 'can't see more for themselves than to get married again, have more children and settle down and be a happy little housewife'. She recognises the difficulties faced by women in combining marriage, children and a career when she says:

I mean, I'd like to settle down eventually but I want a career and there are few men who like women with careers.

Rather like Faith, Beverley would like to 'settle down' eventually but is first looking for an opening in the labour market that will give her a sense of self-esteem.

Maggy too is going through divorce proceedings while she is a student on the course. She has one daughter, Jane, aged six. Like Jessica, Maggy is filled with a sense of having wasted her ability while at school. She took eight GCE 'O' levels but only passed in two subjects. In the following year she retook the subjects she failed but

still only passed in a further two subjects. She offers no explanation for this repeated failure except to say that she made 'a mess' of her 'O' levels. After that she went to the local college of further education to take a full-time two year City and Guilds course in catering. This was in a sea-side resort where employment opportunities were plentiful. However, Maggy did not continue into the second year of the course because because she says 'I was sick of having no money' and she did not like being financially dependent on her parents. She has never had any difficulty in finding employment, both before and after her daughter was born, but now regrets her lack of qualifications which she feels is blocking her access to really interesting work. She says:

I've worked in a lot of places and I've got sort of up [meaning made progress], but when you apply for a job and you haven't got qualifications...because I went to a grammar school I feel as though I'm wasted really. I know I've got a good brain. I always sort of undercut myself really. So as I say I've always done cooking and things and I've got no higher and I got sick of it. Now I've got Jane all you can get is cooking in pubs and things. It's a bit of a dead end job. You don't get anything out of it like proper sort of 'cuisine' [said with an exaggerated French accent].

Her move from the north of England to a rural area in the south-west, the sense of isolation in being at home all day with a small child plus the unhappiness caused by an unsatisfactory relationship with her husband have together fired Maggy with the desire to find 'a decent job'. She says:

And...er...as I say, I want a decent job because...I get this thing...like knowing I made a mess of my 'O' levels and knowing I can do it. I've got this inferiority thing. When I'm talking to people I think I'm thick, which I know I'm not really, but....and Sam [her husband], he isn't up to my standards. It sounds awfully big-headed but my vocabulary seems to have halved since I've been married. Then being at



home with Jane all day, I began to feel I was a cabbage. I was getting really frustrated with this thing inside me crying out sort of to do something worthwhile and ...so when Julie [also a student on the course] rang up and said about coming on this course, I jumped at the chance.

A little later in the interview she returns to these themes and expands on them, describing the course and the new opportunities it holds out as her 'escaping thing'. First she tells me that she is seeking a divorce and then after a long pause goes on:

I need something to be able to say 'This is me'. You know, I'm not this sort of snivelling little wife who can be knocked about because...you know...he's hit me as well. (Pause) So perhaps this'll be my escaping thing. It's also got me back into circulation. When I came down here I didn't know anybody. They say 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure' and then I was pregnant two months after marrying him, so it was a bit, you know, mad. Now I'm beginning to get myself together at last. I used to sit in the house all day and I never used to see anybody. We lived out in the country and I hate that.

The data collected in interview from Maggy demonstrate how firmly the past is implicated in the present. Maggy regards the course as her 'escaping thing'. The qualifications she hopes to gain will enable her to escape from past mistakes. Some of these mistakes were made before she married, both while she was at school and while she was a student in a college of further education. It is clear that she also now regards her marriage as a further mistake. It is not only the physical violence that she finds intolerable, but also the stultifying of her intellectual capabilities. Added to this, she has been at home all day with a small child in an isolated rural area and feels that she was becoming 'a cabbage'. The fact that she has a child places limitations on her

employment opportunities, even in the catering world where she has some experience.

What is Maggy trying to escape from? It would be difficult to identify any single strand in the complex web of her life history as the primary motivating force behind the desire to change her life. Like Jessica, she feels that she wasted her ability at school. Like Valerie, she has found that some employment opportunities are open even to women who have primary responsibility for child-care. She shares Valerie's sentiment, though, that she would prefer to regard this kind of work as a temporary expedient. Like Faith, Beverley and Pat, Maggy's marriage is proving unsatisfactory and she has to face a future in which she will be have to find paid employment and take primary responsibility for child care.

The important thing to note at this stage is that TOPS students look to the past for their reasons for embarking on an office skills course. They are looking for change in some aspect of their lives; they are seeking a revolution. What are their ambitions for the future?

### Ambitions

Like Beverley and the majority of the students on the course, Maggy's ambitions are very high. Also like Beverley, it is not so much financial rewards that she is looking for, although these are obviously important since she will have a young child to care for, but a sense of personal worth and self-esteem.



I suppose I've settled down in my old age and office training seems sense because you can get some good jobs and good pay, but it's not so much that as getting something out of it. I'm not having anything that's not worth having; I'm sick of settling for second best all the time. My brother's girl friend is a Personal Assistant. She has no qualifications whatsoever, she started there as an office junior when she was sixteen, she's now 21 and she's right at the top. If she can do that without any qualifications, I'm going to do something worthwhile as well. I want to feel as though I'm using my brain.

Although Pat, too, is in the process of a divorce (her second), it is an amicable divorce. She says:

As I said before, my marriage isn't going very well. It's a second marriage for us both and it was rather...jumped into. We both now agree that we shouldn't have got married. We're not unhappy. We're going in different directions. There's no upset or quarrelling or anything like that. He has his interests and I have mine.

Like Beverley and Maggy, she therefore looks to a future in which she will be supporting her children.

At 37 Pat is older than Beverley and Maggy and her children aged 13 and 11 are considerably older than theirs. Many of the older TOPS students have one or more children in their teens and it is the increasing independence or anticipated independence of their children that gives these women a new sense of freedom to follow their own interests and inclinations. Although the impending collapse of Pat's second marriage forms a large part of her motivation for joining the course, she also feels that the time has come when she can regard herself almost as a free agent.

In this next extract from the interview with her there are many long pauses during which time she gropes her way towards expressing a sense of her own impending autonomy.

I am ambitious and I want to...well I feel life is...there's an awful lot left...I feel very much more energetic now at 37...I suppose because the children are 13 and 11 and maybe I can see a way forward again. You get a bit bogged down for few years when the children are younger.

During the years when she was 'bogged down' and had to give priority to childcare, Pat worked from home as a reporter for a local newspaper. As the years went by she was called upon to cover an increasingly wide geographical area and to work at short notice at weekends and in the evening. She was paid at the rate of three pence a line for this work. After several years of this work she asked if she could join the staff but was told that the newspaper group could not afford it. Although Pat enjoyed many aspects of the work she felt she was being exploited and, increasingly, that she would like to be properly trained. She expressed a strong desire to gain qualifications so that whatever form of employment she undertook after the course she could do it 'professionally'.

The desire for qualifications was the strong motivating force behind all of the mature students, whatever their individual domestic circumstances. This desire received its starkest expression in the words of one TOPS student, Natalie, who said:

I've got to get those pieces of paper and say 'Look, I've done it.' I've achieved nothing in my life. I've wasted it. I should never have got married. I completely wasted...I'm



very bitter and angry because I've wasted 13 years of my life.

I knew she had two daughters of whom she frequently spoke with great affection, so after the long pause which followed this statement I asked her 'What about your daughters?' She replied:

Yes, but kids aren't everything. I think what opened my mind to go out and do something was the realisation that they're not going to be there for ever. Dawn's coming up to 11 and Avril is 8. Where am I going to be when Kim's 16? I thought 'No, I'm not sitting here at home like a cabbage because I'm too old to go back to work. I'll do something before that happens'. The kids aren't going to be there for ever. I've got to do it now and if I don't do it now I've had it. I don't know what made me do it this year. I could have done it any time in the next five years. I don't know. I've got a bee in my bonnet.

An analysis of the interview data gathered from TOPS students led me to describe them as being at a revolutionary stage of their life. Without exception, they are seeking a change of direction. Their quest for change is based on knowledge both of themselves and the labour market. They are as well aware of earlier mistakes and wrong directions as they are that ample employment opportunities exist for women as office workers, both on a full-time and a part-time basis, provided they have the necessary qualifications. The course will provide them with the necessary qualifications.

I now consider the General Secretarial students who, in contrast to the mature 'revolutionary' students, are described as being at a more tentative 'evolutionary' stage in their life history.

## GENERAL SECRETARIAL STUDENTS

In one sense, the pathway into college was more straightforward for students on the General Secretarial courses than the pathway followed by mature students entering onto the TOPS courses. With only two exceptions, the students in all three General Secretarial cohorts entered college at 16+ straight from school. For these students, entering a college of further education was a natural progression from their years of compulsory schooling.

In interview and in responses to the questionnaire the majority of them said that they preferred college life to being at school. The main reason given for this preference was that they felt they were treated like adults in college. In interview students often had some difficulty in defining precisely what they meant by being treated 'like adults', but it was nevertheless clear that they experienced college as a transitional period between their state of pupil, child-like dependency in school and their anticipated state of autonomy as adults in the labour market.

In another sense, however, the pathway onto the General Secretarial courses was less straightforward for the school-leavers than that for mature students on TOPS courses. The mature students enrolled with a very positive orientation towards office work and the acquisition of the qualifications necessary for such work. As the data indicate, they had strongly defined ambitions either to get 'to the top' or become a well-qualified 'professional' within the world of office work. Their



long term goals are clear. In contrast, it came as something of a surprise when analysis of questionnaire data from the 1985/6 cohort of General Secretarial students revealed how many of them had ended up on the course almost by default. Although these students recognise the need for qualifications beyond those which they had achieved at school, they are not so firmly committed to office work as are the TOPS students.

#### Onto the course

The data presented in detail here were gathered from two sources. One was a questionnaire administered to the 1986/7 cohort of General Secretarial students. The other source was a group interview conducted with six students on the 1985/6 cohort of General Secretarial students. I begin with the questionnaire data.

On the day the questionnaire was administered, there were fifteen present out of a group of eighteen. In answer to the question 'What made you decide to choose the General Secretarial course?' four students wrote that they had embarked on the course for what could be described as negative reasons. One wrote: 'I didn't have enough qualifications to do anything else so I made do with this course.' This student had seven CSE passes in a wide range of subjects: Mathematics 5, English Language 2, English Literature 4, Computer Studies 5, Needlework 4, French 3 and Business Studies 3. It is true that her lowest grades were in Mathematics and in Computer Studies, both 'masculinised' areas of the school curriculum, but her grades and subjects do not merit her comment that she did not have 'enough qualifications to do anything else'.

A second student wrote: 'I came on this course because I didn't know what I wanted to do, so my parents decided the qualifications would be useful.' Although this student failed in Mathematics, she had six CSE passes in a wider range of subjects than the previous student. The majority of her pass grades were average or above average: English Language 3, Environmental Studies 5, Chemistry 4, Cookery 3, Geography 5, Biology 3 and French 3.

A third student wrote: 'I really wanted to take the NNEB course and become a nanny but my exam results weren't good enough so I thought about becoming a secretary as my second choice.' This student's examination course at school was clearly one that closed her post-school options to a choice of traditionally 'feminised' areas of the labour market. She had followed a mixed GCE and CSE course and had also taken some typing examinations. Her examination results were: CSE English Language 2, Mathematics 4, Childcare 3, English Literature 3; GCE English Language E, Art D; plus a Pass grade in Typing (Pitman).

The fourth student wrote: 'I wanted to work in a laboratory in a hospital but I didn't get the qualifications. I had been on a Link Course [2] from school to do typing one afternoon a week at the college. I enjoyed it so when I failed my exams I turned to secretarial work.' This student had followed a mixed GCE and CSE course with a scientific bias. She failed in GCE Mathematics and Chemistry and her passes were: GCE English Language D, Biology E; CSE Geography 4, German 4, Mathematics 2, English Literature 2, French 3.



None of these four students positively chose the General Secretarial course. For three of them it was very much a matter of making the best of disappointed ambitions and for the fourth a matter of accepting parental direction in the absence of her own ambition.

A further two students were using the course and the qualifications they hoped to gain at the end of it in order to be able to join the armed forces when they were old enough. These students were using the course as a bridge into a desired future occupation. One of the two wrote:

I really want to join the WRAC as a clerk. I'm not old enough yet and the qualifications at college will help me.

This student had taken a mix of GCE and CSE examinations at school and her results were: GCE English Literature C, Law C, History D, French E; CSE English Language 2, Home Economics 2, Human Biology 3, Geography 4. The second was a little more undecided about her future and wrote:

I decided that I would like to work with the public, take an office course and then join the WRENS or WRAF. I came on the course because it would give me an idea of what office work would be like and also give me a back-up if I decided I didn't want to join the Forces.

This student is clearly using the course as a 'trying out' period. The experience she gains will enable her to make up her mind about the future and the qualifications she gains will, she feels, be a useful 'back-up'. Her examination results were: GCE History D; CSE History 1, Home Economics 1, Biology 2, English Literature 2, English Language 3, Geography 3, Mathematics 3.

There was only one student in the whole group who said that she had always intended to do office work. She wrote:

I have always wanted to work in an office since I was at primary school. I always thought the work would interest me so I came to college to get the qualifications I needed to do this work.

This student's examination results were modest in terms of grades achieved and the range of those subjects in which she was successful. She had taken but failed CSE Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics. Her passes were: English Language 3, English Literature 4, History 5, Religious Education 3 and Art 3.

The remaining eight students who completed the questionnaire wrote that at some time during their fourth or fifth year at school they had decided to apply for the General Secretarial course because they had then decided that they wanted to do office work. These data indicate quite clearly that, for a significantly large proportion of the students in this cohort, the General Secretarial course was a late and an enforced choice.

### Ambitions

Since the past had played such a large part in shaping the ambitions and aspirations of the TOPS students, I asked General Secretarial students to describe how their career ambitions had developed and changed over the years. The data gathered in answer to this question are significant in two respects. One is that the goal of all of these childhood



ambitions could be described as being firmly located within the stereotypical boundaries of women's work.

### Early aspirations

I have already mentioned the single student in the 1986/7 cohort who wrote that she had always wanted to do office work since she was at primary school. From the remainder of the group, the following occupations received the number of mentions listed as childhood ambitions:

Nurse	8
Veterinary assistant	3
Nanny	3
Primary school teacher	2
Hairdresser	2
Dental assistant	1

The second significant aspect of the data on these early ambitions is that they display a gradually developing awareness on the part of these young women that personal aspirations have to face up to the realities of the labour market.

### Aspirations and reality

In some cases students came to terms with the qualifications required for entry into the previously desired occupation and so rejected it on those grounds. One student wrote:

My first idea of a job was as a vet. I wanted to be a vet because I liked animals. I then decided against it because 'A' levels were needed and at that time I didn't think I was able to do 'A' levels. Then I thought I'd like to do hairdressing.

And another wrote:

My first idea of a job was a teacher in a primary school. I was about nine years old. I gave that up because I became interested in animals, but the qualifications were too high to get into that business.

Others had their early ambitions deflected by their gradually developing awareness and rejection of the real conditions of the work towards which they had previously aspired. One wrote:

When I was 13 or 14 I wanted to be a nurse but then I realised I did not like the thought of washing people and cleaning up blood.

Another wrote:

I wanted to be a dental assistant but got put off by the thought of staring into mouths all day.

And another:

I always thought that I would like to be a hairdresser until I realised that there was no money in it and you would be on your feet all day and every day. The prospect of washing people's greasy hair put me right off.

Another student who had wanted to be a nurse wrote:

I changed my mind when a girl fainted in front of me. I was really scared and then realised I could never be a nurse.

The written answers provided by some students indicate the almost accidental way in which wavering aspirations can be shaped and made firm by experience. One student wrote:

When I was at primary school I wanted to be a nurse. Then when I was older we were shown some films about the heart and blood. It made me feel ill. I also realised you need a lot of training to be a nurse and that put me off. After I had done some work experience as part of a Link Course from school I realised that I enjoyed office work and decided that was what I wanted to do.



At 16+ these young women have had to come to terms with the need to match their own aspirations with the entry qualifications demanded by, and the real working conditions of, previously desired occupations. As one student put it:

Between the age of 7 and about 15 I wanted to be a nurse and intended to come to college on the pre-nursing course. Then I found out that there was a lot of hard work involved and you had to have a lot of good examination results which I thought I couldn't get. It became a toss up between nursing and secretarial work and when I didn't get the exam results for nursing I decided to do this course.

For this student, as for many others, the decision to choose the General Secretarial course was a last-minute decision based on school-leaving examination results.

The last-minute nature of this decision was strongly confirmed by data gathered in a group interview with six students in the 1985/6 cohort of General Secretarial students. The general feeling among the students interviewed was that their 16+ examination results left them with very few options. When I asked why they had chosen the General Secretarial course one said:

It was the only course I could get into with my qualifications, with my CSEs.

Three others said that they had applied for the NNEB course at Riverbank College since their primary ambition had been to be a nanny. When I asked what had happened to that ambition, one said, 'I didn't have enough 'O' levels'. The others nodded, indicating that the same answer applied to them.

One of the six had carefully considered the options available to her with her 16+ qualifications. She had attended an all-through 11-18 comprehensive school just outside the catchment area of Riverbank College and so had the choice of returning to school or enrolling on a course in the college. She said:

I didn't want to go back to school or do 'O' levels here or a YTS course.

She also realised that she 'didn't have much chance of getting a job' and so thought she would 'do a secretarial course'.

These students have had serious thoughts about possible careers. By the time they arrive on the General Secretarial course at Riverbank College they have learned to come to terms with their own ability measured by school examination results, their knowledge of the requirements and conditions of specific areas of the labour market and the opportunities available in the labour market locally. They would certainly not fall into the category of the 'girls' as described by Delamont when she says:

Girls do not seem to realise that they will have to work for most of their lives in badly paid unskilled jobs unless they leave school with qualifications even if they marry. Adolescents seem blinded to the reality of the labour market by the rosy glow of romance, in ways that boys are not, and schools seem to be failing totally to dispel that rosy glow (Delamont, 1980:70).

### Marriage, motherhood and career

It is easy to make such assumptions about adolescent girls when they are only just beginning to formulate their life plans. It is also easy to



understand why, when questioned about their plans for the future, adolescent girls might find it simpler to include marriage in these plans than to expose their indecision about a career in paid employment. We have already seen how the career plans of General Secretarial students changed during their teenage years.

Many of these young women are still not certain that office work is really what they want to do. It is even more difficult for young women at this stage of their life to make predictions about how, if at all, they might combine marriage and motherhood with paid employment.

When I asked this particular group of 'girls' in my study, students in the 1986/7 General Secretarial cohort, to write down what they thought they might be doing at the age of 21, the 'rosy glow of romance' does not seem to have entered into their thinking. Their answers to the question are as follows:

1. Married? No children yet and still working and I'd like to travel but I might travel before I marry.
2. At 21 I expect I'll not be married but living on my own in London and working full-time.
3. I will be married with two children and perhaps working part-time.
4. Married? Emigrated abroad and working in a part-time job with two children.
5. I would hope to be working.
6. Hopefully I will be in the WRAC.
7. I should be working on a full-time basis and hopefully, still single.

8. Single and working. Living on my own in a flat or room. Driving my own car and having an office to myself. Arriving home at 5.30 to be greeted by my Alsation dog.
9. Married? Working full-time.
10. Married? No children. A good career.
11. Working.
12. I won't be married but I will be working.
13. Working in an office and probably married.
14. Married and working.
15. Married? Working in an office. No children.

Only the responses from two students (3) and (4) come anywhere near the 'married with two children' conventional picture of domestic life. Even here, the response from (3) indicates that she might be working at least part-time and the response from (4) adds a touch of the exotic to this picture by making emigration a part of it. Three students (5), (6) and (11) make no mention at all of marriage in their future lives, neither its presence nor its absence. Four students (2), (7), (8) and (12) make a positive declaration that they will still be single. Six students (1), (9), (10), (13), (14) and (15) envisage the possibility of marriage by the time they are twenty-one. It is noticeable, though, that three of these six state positively that they will not have any children by that time.

The general picture that emerged from the data gathered from all three cohorts of General Secretarial students is one of young women very much in an unstable state of transition between the childhood world of



compulsory schooling and the adult world. For many, however, the final decision has not yet been made. Entry onto the General Secretarial course is just one more stage in the decision-making process about their future lives. It is for this reason that I describe the General Secretarial students as being in a state of transition or 'evolution'. They are just beginning to come to terms with the need to match their own intellectual abilities and personal inclinations to the configurations of the labour market. For many of them, embarking on the General Secretarial course is simply one more stage in this evolutionary process.

As has been argued earlier, the mature students on the TOPS courses are in a state of what I would describe as revolution rather than evolution. In all cases, the mature students have an intensely positive future orientation based on a desire to change some aspect of the known past. In contrast, the 16+ school-leavers are still tentatively working their way towards an unknown and uncertain future. What both groups of students have in common, though, is the desire to gain at least some of the marketable technical skills made available to them in their course curriculum package. The high level of commitment to the general aims of the course does not, however, imply an acceptance of the equal value of all the subjects which are included in the course package.

#### RESPONSES TO THE COURSE

In an earlier chapter I argued that the responses of both groups of

students to the course they were following could be described as 'conformist' in that there was very little evidence of overt conflict between teachers and students in the classroom. I also argued that it cannot be assumed from this superficial appearance of classroom conformity that students place equal value on all the subjects which make up their curriculum. Although students are presented with a table d'hôte curricular package they gradually convert this into an à la carte curriculum.

The progress from table d'hôte to à la carte was only ever made manifest in the classroom behaviour of one student. Apart from this single example, it was only data gathered in interview that revealed the process of selection and rejection which, for the majority of students, is a process of conflict avoidance.

I begin with the single example of overt rejection. The student concerned is called Jo and the subject shorthand.

#### OVERT REJECTION

Jo was a student in the 1985/6 General Secretarial cohort. I have already explained that all full-time students receive a report at the end of the first term of their course. This is Jo's Christmas report, fourteen weeks into a thirty-six week course:

English	C	Jo's course work is adequate in quantity, but if some of her considerable energy were directed to greater care she could improve.
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Office Practice	B-	Jo is co-operative and a suitable candidate for office work. She seems enthusiastic about the subject.
Business Calculations	C	With more application, Jo could greatly improve the quality of her work.
Word Processing	B+	Jo is a lively and able student who is making good progress - even better progress could be made.
Shorthand	D	Jo needs to develop a neater style of writing.
Typing	D	An able student, but unfortunately Jo lacks sustained concentration.
General Remarks		A cheerful and lively student. Jo tends to have a too casual approach to her studies.

Even at this early stage in the course the grades and comments on her report make it clear that Jo is making much better progress in some subjects than in others. The D grades in shorthand and typing contrast with the B grades in Word Processing and Office Practice. The written comment for Office Practice that Jo is 'a suitable candidate for office work' sits rather uneasily beside the grades and comments for shorthand and typing and the General Remarks written by her course tutor.

I regularly observed this cohort of General Secretarial students in shorthand and typing lessons. By the end of the first term it was clear that Jo had mentally given up on shorthand although she still attended lessons regularly. What follows is a combination of a transcription of an audio-tape recording of a shorthand lesson and notes made on the spot. The lesson took place in the first week in December 1985, nine weeks into the course.



The teacher begins the lesson by announcing that students are to carry out a 'drilling' exercise that they had been asked to prepare for homework. This kind of exercise performs the same purpose as the repetitive scale exercises that musicians use to sharpen up techniques. Both the shorthand and the longhand version of the exercise is in their text books, so the first instruction from the teacher is that students should close their text books.

The teacher then dictates the exercise which consists of a connected passage of five short sentences. At the end of the dictation the teacher instructs students to transcribe their shorthand into longhand. There is a general silence as students follow the teacher's instructions. After a few seconds, this silence is broken by Jo who begins to cough a rather dramatic, 'stage' cough. The teacher asks, 'Do you want to go out for a drink, Jo?' She replies, 'No, it's alright.'

The teacher then begins to walk slowly round the class, picking up completed transcriptions to be marked later. As she gets nearer to the corner of the room where Jo is sitting she becomes aware of the fact that Jo is not transcribing her own shorthand but copying the longhand from her neighbour, Andrea. The teacher says, 'Jo, you won't have Andrea to help you in the exam. You'll be on your own then.' Jo's response to this is a long drawn out 'W-e-e-e-e-e-ll, I won't be doing this.' She is attempting to make clear to the teacher that she has no intention of taking the external examination in shorthand. This calmly made, but defiant, statement is matched, not by conflict or confrontation from the teacher, but a mildly spoken 'I hope you will.' The teacher continues to pick up completed pieces of work from the rest of the class, including Andrea, as though nothing untoward had happened.

Jo is then left to complete the transcription of her own shorthand without being able to copy from Andrea's work. While she does so she sighs heavily in away that is obviously intended to draw attention. The teacher responds to this call for attention by saying, 'I told you you'd have trouble reading your shorthand, didn't I Jo.' Jo responds with another long 'W-e-e-e-e-e-ll.' The teacher makes no response to this, although it is obviously an abbreviated repetition of the earlier 'W-e-e-e-e-e-ll, I won't be doing this.' It was spoken in the same tone of voice and accompanied by the same body language; lounging indolently over the desk and making no eye-contact with the teacher.

The teacher is now back at the teacher's desk and anxious to progress to the next phase of the lesson. Apart from Jo, who is still struggling with her transcription, the rest of the



class is waiting for the next stage in the routine which is to repeat the exercise already dictated at increasingly high speeds. The teacher suggests that she will first dictate at 40, then 60 and then 80 words a minute. Jo looks up and says, 'Are you waiting for me? Carry on 'cos I'll be ages.' Again the teacher does not let Jo interrupt the flow of the lesson, neither does she reprimand her in any way. She simply says to Jo, 'Will you?' and repeats the instructions for the next phase of the lesson, 'Right we'll go on with the speed [test] then. We'll start at 40, then 60 and I'll see who can do it at 80.'

At the end of the 40wpm dictation students self-check their shorthand. The teacher says to the whole class, 'Right now I want you to try the same one at 60.' She then turns to Jo 'I'd like you to join in now if you can.' Jo says, 'I don't want to join in anyway.' The teacher says, 'I'd like you to join in. Right? Ready?' She rushes on with the dictation. As far as I could see from where I was sitting, Jo looked as though she was writing and keeping up with the dictation. The teacher asks three students by name (but not Jo) whether or not they had managed to keep up with the speed. Two had and one had not. She then says to the class, Now I'm going to try it at 80 for those of you who can really write fast. Now if you get left behind, don't put vowels in, just do the outlines only. Leave a gap and come back into my voice again otherwise you'll never write at 80. I've got to try to force you to write quickly.' Only then does she turn her attention to Jo and asks, 'Did you manage that at 60, Jo, or not.' Jo's reply is simply 'Yep.' The teacher says, 'Good; ready then.'

She dictates the same passage at 80wpm. At the end of the dictation she walks to the table where Andrea and Jo are sitting. From a glance at their notepads it is clear to the teacher that Andrea had managed to keep up the speed but Jo had not. She says, 'You did it, didn't you Andrea. Now Jo, you haven't joined in. If you got lost, do you remember what I said?' Jo replies, 'Yeah.' The teacher says, 'But you didn't do it, did you?' Jo replies, 'No.' The teacher does not reprimand Jo but simply repeats the warning she had given earlier to the whole class, 'You'll never write faster, do you see.'

She then asks who in addition to Andrea had managed to keep up. Some, but not all, had done so. The teacher then says, 'Do you want me to repeat it once more so that Jo has a go. This time see if everyone can get it.' She then turns specifically to Jo and adds, 'Now Jo, did you get that? Leave a gap and join in. Are we ready? Have you got your pencil poised? That's right.' She then dictates the passage at 80wpm.



At the end of the dictation she quickly asks if any more students got it right this time. With scarcely a pause she rushes on the next exercise and starts dictating a new passage. She follows the same routine of dictating first at 40, then at 60 and then at 80. The only intervention from Jo during this exercise is a loud and long yawn. The teacher asks, 'Are you alright, Jo?' She replies, 'Yeah.'

The next exercise is different. It is based on a passage in their textbook which is written out in shorthand only. The teacher says, 'Now this exercise we're going to do a little differently. We're going to read it, but each girl can read a line. We're going to read out lines but you're not going to know which line. I'll be dotting around the room.' She adds that she will give them some time to prepare the passage and will move round the class to help anybody who gets stuck.

After a few minutes Jo says in a loud voice, 'Miss, I'm not going to be able to do this.' The teacher was at the opposite side of the room from Jo and was busy helping a student, but it seemed to me that she could not avoid hearing what Jo said since the rest of the class was working silently. However, she behaved as though she had not heard and Jo did not repeat her statement. After a while I noticed that Jo was simply copying down a longhand transcription of the exercise from Andrea's notepad. Then Jo and Andrea began to share the workload with Jo attempting to read some of the words out loud. By this time the teacher was getting near to the side of the room where Jo and Andrea were sitting. Instead of rebuking them for working together she says, 'Do you want some help, Jo.' Jo says, 'Please.' The teacher moves over to help saying, 'Let me see then. Where are you looking? This one?'

When the teacher has moved all the way round the class she explains what she wants the students to do for homework in order to prepare for the next lesson on the following day. It is now 11.52 and the lesson is due to end at 12.00. The students take this reference to homework as a signal that the lesson has ended and start packing up their bags. The teacher says, 'I haven't said you can go yet. We've still got five minutes.' There is a general chorus of 'Oh, no' with Jo's voice being the loudest. The teacher persuades them to continue working for a few more minutes and then says, 'Right, if you want to go now...' She is interrupted by Jo saying in a loud voice 'We do want to go.'



After the students had left the classroom I asked the teacher about Jo's statement that she would not be taking the exam. The teacher said, 'They all have to; it's the whole course or nothing.'

The next transcript is of a shorthand lesson in mid-February 1986; almost half way through the course. Two students left the course at Christmas but Jo is still attending.

The lesson begins with a passage dictated from their textbook. At this stage in the course students are instructed that they must do 'free' and not 'copy' dictation. After they have been given a few minutes to look over the passage they are therefore told to turn their textbooks over and take down the dictation on a clean page of their spiral notepad.

At the end of the dictation students are directed to transcribe their shorthand into longhand. At this point Jo asks, 'Is this work to be handed in?' The teacher says, 'Yes please; shorthand and longhand.' Jo replies, 'I'm not handing it in.' The teacher says, 'There are lots of things you have to do that you don't want to do, Jo.' Jo tries again by saying, 'It's not worth you marking it.' The teacher closes the discussion by saying, 'I'll decide that.' Throughout this exchange the teacher is sitting in front of the class at the teacher's desk. She has been marking work done by other students. It is quite a customary practice for teachers to do this while students are quietly working. At the end of the exchange with Jo she lowers her eyes and continues marking. Jo says nothing more but quietly copies from her neighbour, Andrea.

At a later stage in the lesson students are taking it in turns to 'translate' out loud some sentences which are printed in shorthand in their textbook. Jo sits quietly through the readings by other students. When her turn comes it is clear she has not brought her textbook to the lesson and has to borrow Andrea's. The teacher seems not to notice this. Jo pauses for a long time and Andrea whispers something to her. The teacher says to Jo, 'Say what you think, not what Andrea thinks.' After another lengthy pause Jo says slowly and emphatically, defiantly looking the teacher straight in the eye, 'I don't know.' The teacher ignores the defiance, moves over to Jo's desk and 'nurses' her through the reading of the sentence. She begins by saying, 'Well what have you got? What's the first stroke,



the long stroke?' Jo 'translates' this shape correctly so the teacher says, 'Yes' and moves on to the next stroke of the shorthand. Together, but with some heavy sighs from Jo, teacher and student move through each word in the sentence.

It is clear from Jo's behaviour in these two lessons that she has no wish to continue with shorthand. In the first lesson she twice 'told' the teacher that she did not want to take the external examination. The teacher refused to make an issue of this matter and continued with the lesson as though nothing had been said. In both lessons the teacher helps Jo out so as to incorporate her within the pattern of the lesson. At no point does Jo's behaviour halt the flow of the lesson. The loud stage cough is politely treated by the teacher as though it were a real cough, causing difficulty to the student. The cough and the loud sighs are disregarded by other students; Jo's behaviour does not distract them from their work.

Jo has clearly rejected shorthand as one of the technical skills which she wants to have in her repertoire. When she was interviewed nearer the end of the course she said that she wanted a job as a receptionist. She described shorthand as 'boring' and, for her, 'pointless'. In contrast she described Office Practice as 'a-mazing'. She enjoyed it as a classroom activity and could see the relevance of the skills she was learning to her future occupational needs. The comment on Jo's report for Office Practice: 'Jo is co-operative and a suitable candidate for office work' looks odd when placed in close proximity with illustrations of Jo's behaviour in shorthand lessons.



When Jo's precise occupational aspirations are known it makes sense; she can then be regarded as an astute critic of the course curriculum. However, Jo's criticisms of shorthand do not result in disruptive classroom behaviour. She makes her feelings known without disrupting the teacher's control of classroom routines.

The example of Jo has been used at this stage to illustrate two points. One is that students respond as individuals to the course package with which they are presented. These responses are based on student perceptions of the skill demands of the labour market and a developing awareness of their own abilities and interests. On these grounds, some subjects are accepted and others are rejected. The second point to be made is that when a student rejects an element of the curriculum, this does not result in disruptive classroom behaviour.

To end the chapter I draw on interview data to demonstrate that covert, selective rejection is carried out by most students as they convert a table d'hôte curricular package into one that more closely fits their own anticipated skill needs.

#### COVERT REJECTION

Some student comments on individual subjects have been used already. For example, it has already been demonstrated that many students reject Secretarial Duties as a valuable qualification since they regard what they are learning as little more than 'common sense'. We have seen that

one TOPS student in the 1985/6 cohort went so far as to dismiss the subject completely when she said:

Secretarial Duties is just a waste of time. You cannot teach somebody how to behave in an office. They've got to learn that for themselves.

Many students reject shorthand on the grounds that it is a redundant skill in the modern office. One TOPS student said of the subject:

It's out of date. I mean they do all this audio-typing. You find that in most firms all the directors and what have you talk into these little machines.

A General Secretarial student expressed the same view. I asked in a group interview whether or not they thought shorthand would be useful. One of the students replied:

I don't. It's all audio-typing now, isn't it. Well, in most offices it is.

Some students, though, have their own purposes in pursuing a qualification shorthand. A very commonly held view is that shorthand could be 'handy', as one student put it, in tasks such as taking a telephone message or taking minutes of meetings. One TOPS student was astute enough to recognise that employers might ask for a qualification in shorthand simply as an indicator of 'patience' in an employee. She regarded the subject as a passport into a well-paid job. She said:

You look in the papers and the jobs that offer most money ask for shorthand. Maybe they think that somebody who's got shorthand has had the patience to sit and learn it, you see, and they think they're going to be good.



One TOPS student has already been quoted as saying of book-keeping:

I like book-keeping. I'm probably the only one who's said that. I really enjoy it and would like more of it.

She is accurate in her assessment of the opinion of other students in the same cohort. All those who were interviewed rejected book-keeping. Some expressed an interest in the subject but felt that if they were to make any real progress then the subject should have been allocated more than one hour a week in the timetable. Most, however, rejected the subject outright as a skill that they felt they would never need.

In interview students readily differentiate between the various elements of the course. They have their own view of the relative market value of each subject and construct a hierarchy of subjects largely on this basis. This selective activity does not lead to overt rejection and rebellion in the classroom. For one TOPS student in the 1985/6 cohort, Secretarial Duties ranks low in her hierarchy of subjects but she is prepared 'to sit in there', as she puts it, and not reject it in any overt fashion. She says:

I don't like the subject at all. I'll sit in there, but to me it's a complete waste of time. The time we spend on Secretarial Duties we could be doing our shorthand.

## CONCLUSION

Most vocational courses in colleges of further education manifestly reproduce the sexual divisions of the labour market. This is true of the two courses described in this study. While this process of reproduction

has been widely criticised, very little research has been done which examines how and why such a process occurs.

The classroom behaviour of students in this study would suggest that they could be described as 'conformists' in two respects. One is that they accept the boundaries and definitions of women's work, since they have chosen to follow courses that prepare them for 'quintessentially feminine' paid employment as office workers (Pringle, 1989:3). The other is that they accept the institutional definition of what constitutes an adequate preparation for office work.

The data presented in this chapter demonstrate that the reproduction of the sexual division of labour is not so simple and straightforward as macro-sociological theory would suggest. The working consensus of the classroom is the outcome of active choices and decisions made by students. It is not simply a passive response to conditions beyond their choice.



## FOOTNOTES

[1] But see McLean, M. (1991) Girls and Disruption: a life history approach, Bristol University, unpublished MEd dissertation.

[2] Link Courses are provided in Riverbank College for pupils in their final year in local comprehensive schools. Courses are run during the school day and usually last for one or two hours each week. Most of these courses are vocational.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONSERVATIVE TEACHERS?



The description and analysis of the occupational culture of teachers is a growth area in the study of educational institutions. This is a timely development since at the level of both common-sense understanding and sociological analysis teachers have had a raw deal. At some times and within some theoretical frameworks they have been regarded as villains; at other times and within rival theoretical frameworks they have been regarded as victims. Analytical oscillation between these two extreme points has done little to develop a thorough understanding of teachers, their work or the conditions under which they work. It is recent sociological 'news' that, as Sikes, Measor and Woods (1985) put it, teachers:

...are first and foremost people who just happen to be in the job of teaching (Sikes, Measor and Woods, 1985:9)

In this chapter I use data collected in informal interviews with teachers in the study in order to analyse their classroom behaviour as I observed it. This behaviour could be regarded as conservative since it does nothing to challenge the sexual divisions of the labour market. On the contrary, classroom activities are firmly directed towards enabling students to achieve the qualifications they will need to find a place within a feminised segment of the labour market.

Before looking more closely at teachers in the Secretarial Section of Riverbank College, I outline some of the recent and relevant

developments in the study of teachers and teaching which have informed this study.

## TEACHERS IN SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### VILLAINS OR VICTIMS?

In many early educational studies which took as their problem the failure of schools to eradicate class inequalities (Lacey, 1970; Hargreaves 1967; Sharp and Green, 1975; Willis, 1977) teachers are regarded as being little more than undifferentiated functionaries of the institution within which they work. In such studies teachers appear as the human embodiment of institutional purposes who possess no life, inner or otherwise, of their own. Viewed from this perspective teachers are thus villains, inextricably but somewhat inexplicably implicated in the general failure of schools to achieve the emancipatory goals set for them by liberal reformists.

Other studies, particularly those adopting an interactionist perspective on classroom processes (Pollard, 1975; Woods, 1979), are more sensitive to teachers as individuals. Here the emphasis is on analysing the strategies adopted by teachers in order to 'cope' with the contextual constraints on their classroom activities (Woods, 1979, 1980b and 1990b). Some debate exists (Pollard, 1982) about the source of contextual constraints and whether they can more appropriately be analysed at the micro-sociological or the macro-sociological level. However, the point that interactionist studies have in common is that teachers are regarded as active agents who are capable of interpreting



the material conditions of their work context and making decisions about the appropriate ways in which to respond to these conditions.

Two recent developments in the study of teachers have deep implications for an understanding of the work of the teachers here. One is the use of life history as a research method. The second is the critical impact which feminist research has had on the understanding of teachers' careers.

### Life history

In arguing for the rehabilitation of the life history method in educational research, Goodson says:

Whilst not wishing to argue that teachers do not have important characteristics in common, we argue that there are important distinctions in attitude, performance and strategies which can be identified in different teachers in different times. To understand the degree of importance of these distinctions we have to reconnect our studies of schooling with investigations of personal biography and historical background: above all we are arguing for the reintegration of situational with biographical and historical analysis (Goodson, 1981:69).

'Situational' analysis, although a valuable antidote to the rough generalisations of much macro-sociological theory, is not enough; its focus is simply on the present. Biographical data, made available through the use of the life history method, enables us to locate teacher practices within a much broader framework. Teachers have a 'life history', a past existence which inevitably impacts on the present.

The use of the life history method not only integrates the temporal aspects of an individual's life, it is also capable of integrating the various elements that constitute an individual's life. Studies of teachers which employ the life history method demonstrate weaknesses in earlier studies in which 'career' was limited to an individual's activity in the public sphere of paid employment. The use of the life history method demonstrates that the public sphere and the private sphere can no longer, even analytically, be regarded as separate realms. Sikes, Measor and Woods argue that in order to understand teachers' motives and behaviour in the classroom 'we need as near complete a biographical picture as we can acquire' (Sikes, Measor and Woods, 1985:13).

### Feminist theory

This concern to integrate previously segmented elements of an individual's life activity is familiar to feminist theory, particularly to socialist feminist theory. First, social feminists argue that in order to understand women's engagement with the public sphere of paid employment it is impossible to disregard their engagement with the private sphere of domestic labour. An analysis of the former without recognition of the latter has led to some deep misconceptions in social theory about the life activity of women. Secondly, it is also important to take a complete view of the life cycle when theorising women's labour market participation. A 'snapshot' view can be seriously misleading. For the majority of women, labour market participation varies considerably



over the life cycle since it can be heavily dependent on the changing demands on women's labour power in the domestic sphere.

The work history data presented in Chapter Four demonstrate the various ways in which the teachers in the study balanced the dual demands on their labour power. While their children were young they withdrew totally or partially from the labour market. As their children grew older and child-care responsibilities diminished they then returned to the labour market, but always attempting to do so on terms that they found acceptable. The larger structure of the sexual division of labour, both in the domestic sphere and in the public sphere of paid employment, is familiar territory to these teachers; their lives have been framed by it. This knowledge is increasingly shared and used by researchers who analyse teacher 'careers' (Acker, 1983b and 1989; De Lyon and Migniuolo, 1989; Evetts, 1989 and 1990; Grant, 1987 and 1989).

I now draw on work history data that were collected in informal interviews with the teachers in the study, concentrating on the first phase of the work history. This first phase runs from initial entry into the labour market to the point of giving up paid employment at the time of their first pregnancy. This is the phase in the work history of women which Mason, Dressel and Bain (1959) identify as a 'short adventure'.

#### THE SHORT ADVENTURE

The teachers I interviewed recognised the importance of their formal teacher qualifications and often gave up their own time to gain them by

attending courses in the evening. However, in the classroom they draw much of their authority and confidence as teachers from their earlier period of paid employment as office workers. During my period of classroom observation I was struck by the frequency with which teachers made reference to their experience of office work either to illustrate a general point or, more often, to legitimate an instruction they were giving to students or a demand they were making of them. This past experience was clearly an important element of their present practice as teachers. Office routines and practices were not challenged but constantly affirmed by teachers' references to them.

During an interview one teacher said, 'I'm glad I'm not a teacher who knows it just from books'. I asked her to explain what she meant. She said:

I came here as a teacher as I told you before, from an office, having done all these things. Because you can draw on experience and the tips you can give them, I can't think of an example now, but they're worth far more than all the things you read in text books. Just simple things. I think it gives them confidence too if they know you can say 'When I used to deal with the mail' or 'When I did this...'. You're not just a teacher who knows it just from text books. I think they respect you for having done it and as I've told you I started from a lowly office junior and worked up to a secretarial post, so I have done all these jobs in the past.

This teacher clearly articulates the importance of her past experience as an office worker and its value in her current pedagogical practice. She feels that 'useful tips' gleaned from practical experience are far more valuable to her students than what is written in text books. This past experience is a resource that can be immediately drawn on since it resides in the teacher's memory. More important than this immediacy of



reference, though, is the fact that the teacher has successfully performed the task which she is teaching to her students. It gives students 'confidence' and enhances their 'respect' for the teacher. The fact that this teacher, as did the other teachers in the study, began her period of office work in a 'lowly' position and 'worked up to a secretarial post' is also important. The progress made through the office hierarchy as it exists for women acts as a model of performance to be emulated by students. The success of their teachers as office workers is a constant reminder to students that it is possible to 'work up' from lowly beginnings to higher things. The theme of 'working your way up' is one that is repeated frequently in teachers' accounts of the first phase of their work history.

I begin with extracts from an interview with Marianna. During the time of the study she was Head of the Department of Business Studies. In this interview I asked her to describe her first steps into the labour market after leaving school. Marianna summed up her progress by saying 'I really have seen every stage of the game'.

#### EVERY STAGE OF THE GAME

##### Marianna

Marianna attended a girls' grammar school in the county town near West Port and left at sixteen with a School Certificate, the equivalent of GCE Ordinary levels which were introduced a few years later. This first extract from an interview with Marianna demonstrates how she manoeuvred her way from the bottom rung of the office work hierarchy and into a

position that she found more rewarding by moving from one employer to another. Her first job on leaving school was as a clerk probationer in County Hall. This is how she describes it:

I took School Certificate (that dates me a bit) and then I decided against staying on at school. So I applied for a job at County Hall as a clerk probationer, the lowest of the low. You really were a probationer. You had to do all the duplicating. I spent the first three months doing nothing but running things off on a Gestetner machine. And then you rose to be in charge of the duplicating machine. It really was... (laughs)...I really have seen every stage of the game. Everything you duplicated you had to show to the supervisor.

Marianna's lowly status was impressed on her, not just by the work she was given to do, but also by her physical location in the large room in which all the clerical work was carried out. Probationers were placed at the front of the room. With each promotion, as she says: 'You literally moved from the front of this great big room to the back'. The senior position at the back of this room was held by the secretary to the Clerk of the County Council.

Like two of the other teachers whose work history is analysed in detail in this chapter, Marianna had left school with no specific office skills or qualifications. These were gained partly through training in her first post, partly through lessons from her aunt and partly by attending evening classes at the further education college in the town where she lived. She says:

I'd been having shorthand and typing lessons from my aunt. If I did the shopping for her on Saturday morning she would give me a lesson. Then they began a shorthand training scheme at County Hall for people who worked in the Clerk's department. We had speed training for about three mornings a week. Within two years of starting that I had got up to 120 words a minute. I'd never had proper typing lessons, except



from my aunt, and I'd never taken any typing exams so I also began to take typing lessons at evening class.

Armed with these new skills, Marianna advanced first to being a junior typist and then to a shorthand typist. She says:

I started going round taking very simple letters from very junior County Hall officials in the Clerk's department. It was ever so junior. I was always looking for the day when I'd be...I got fed up of waiting...I thought well if people who were at the back of the room had been in County Hall for years and years before they got there... Anyway, I saw a job advertised as secretary to the Chief Horticultural Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture offices and I thought 'Yes, it's time I was somebody's secretary. I'm not going to wait for another three years before I'm somebody's secretary'. So I applied for the job and I got it.

Marianna enjoyed the stimulus of the new post and the additional responsibility it entailed.

It was a very good job because I was a sort of private secretary, not a clerk. My boss was very kind; the more I learned, the more he gave me. Long before I was twenty I was doing quite high level work.

However, it soon began to look as though the working conditions she enjoyed as a private secretary would deteriorate when a decision was made to form a typing pool instead of allowing individual officers to have their own secretary.

Marianna was not prepared to work in a typing pool and decided that she would only stay with the Ministry of Agriculture if she got the job as supervisor of the typing pool. She had worked hard to accumulate a large number of shorthand and typing qualifications. She dismisses her motivation to acquire these additional qualifications as greed:

The more exams you passed the more money you got. Being greedy, I just took every shorthand and typing exam that was going. That's when I took my first ever typing exam. They said if you passed Stage Three Proficiency they'd give you an extra pound a week. I took it and got a second class pass. Then they said if you got a first class pass they'd give you two pounds a week; so I took it again and passed. And that's the way I went on. If they offered money, sounds terrible doesn't it, I would go in for it. So in the end I'd really got beyond anybody else and at that time I was the most highly qualified secretary working for the Ministry of Agriculture in the county. When they began to talk about this typing pool I thought 'Well if I can't be supervisor I'm not going to stay here.' I got the job. We had eight to ten women in the typing pool and it was very difficult because they'd all been somebody's secretary and I was the youngest at the time. I was 19 or 20 but I learned a lot about how to treat people. I think I was a bit cocky, but I soon learned not to be.

Whether or not her motivation can be regarded simply as greed, Marianna had ensured that she was sufficiently well-qualified at a relatively early age to exercise control over changing working conditions. She attributes this degree of control to her possession of technical skills and certification, not to age or the social skills required in knowing how to 'treat people'.

She remained with the Ministry of Agriculture for seven years, during which time she married. Then Marianna gave up her job to follow her husband to his new job as a farm manager in a neighbouring county. On first moving, she decided not to look for paid employment because she thought, as a farm manager's wife, she would have 'lots to do'. As things turned out she became bored because she 'didn't have anything to do at all' and so worked as a private secretary to a chartered accountant. She describes this work as 'great fun' which she 'really enjoyed', but gave it up to follow her husband again when he



moved into a new job in a different county. By the time they made this move Marianna was pregnant. She had three children and did not look for paid employment again until her youngest child was four and a half years old.

A similar pattern of making progress by changing employer is displayed in the first phase of the work history of Jenny.

### Jenny

Like Marianna and the other teachers in the study, Jenny attended a girls' grammar school and left at 16. Unlike the other teachers, though, Jenny had followed a one-year secretarial course in her final year at school and so left at sixteen with with GCE Ordinary levels plus good speed qualifications in shorthand and typing. After leaving school, she improved these speed qualifications by attending evening classes for a term at the local technical college. Her point of entry into the labour market as a shorthand typist in the Education Department of County Hall was therefore at a slightly higher level than that of the other teachers in the study. She considers that this experience in County Hall gave her what she describes as 'a good grounding' in office work, but she derived no real satisfaction from it because as she says, 'you never saw a job through'.

Unlike Dorothy and Christine, who worked for a large industrial firm and so could progress up an internal hierarchy of office work, Jenny had to move in order to find a post which would give her this

missing sense of seeing a job through from beginning to end. She worked for a year as secretary to the professor of German at the university in the city where she lived and describes this job as 'super'. This freedom of movement from one employer to another in the search for the job that matches individual definitions of 'super' or 'interesting' is frequently mentioned by students as an attractive feature of this particular sector of the labour market. There seem to be no penalties attached to frequent movement between jobs. The converse of this is that there seem to be very few bonuses attached to long service.

Jenny's next move was not made in order to improve her working conditions. Like Marianna, Jenny changed jobs in order to follow her husband when he moved to a new job near West Port. However, she was fortunate enough to find what she describes as 'another super job' as secretary to the consultant psychiatrist and neurologist at a hospital in the county town near West Port. She says of this job:

It was very interesting work. I was there for twelve months and then left when I became pregnant.

This blunt statement is almost a verbal replica of that made by Dorothy when she described what she felt was her 'interesting' work as a secretary and a few seconds later added: 'And then I left to have Celia, my first child.' The tone of voice in which these statements were made was identical. It was simply stated and accepted as a fact of life that whatever post they held, however interesting, would have to be permanently relinquished once they became pregnant.



I next consider the first phase work history of Christine and Dorothy. Although about ten years older than Dorothy, this phase of Christine's work history almost exactly replicates that of Dorothy. They attended the girls' grammar school in West Port, they both left school at sixteen after taking GCE Ordinary levels and both began work as an office junior with the same local firm, West Port's largest industrial employer which I have called ABC. I begin with Christine.

### Christine

Christine, like Jenny, was a full-time teacher in the secretarial section throughout the life span of the study. Christine explains that she chose to work for ABC, 'a bigger firm' because she thought she would be able to work her way up through the different levels of office work there. She began as an office junior performing such tasks as filing and answering the phone. In this interview she was careful to distinguish between making tea and carrying the tea tray round to provide people with tea. As an office junior, she performed the latter task, but not the former. Christine had left school with no specific office skills, but soon began to accumulate them. The woman who was the supervisor of the typing pool at ABC provided typing lessons after working hours. The firm paid for these lessons, but the instruction was limited to the achievement of the speed of 20 words a minute. Once that target had been reached, usually within ten weeks, young women were then expected to move into the typing pool. After that, as Christine puts it, they just 'picked up' refinements such as layouts from other typists.

Christine was saved from the typing pool by two factors. One was that she had been taking private lessons in shorthand from the same woman who gave the typing lessons at ABC. Within a year she managed to achieve the speed of 120 words a minute. The other was that her department head asked for her to stay in the department as a shorthand-typist rather than have her transferred to the typing pool. In the interview Christine at first attributes this to the fact that she was 'a little blue-eyed girl' and a 'goody-goody' but later admits that she did work hard and was conscientious.

She regards the training she received in this department as 'excellent' although rather 'severe'. She said of the department in which she worked:

It was very good training when I look back. I mean at the time the boss was a bit severe and I wasn't too keen on him [the department head], but I think the training was excellent. I worked up through that department. First of all I was office junior, then typist, then shorthand typist and eventually I became his secretary.

Christine also comments on the encouragement that was given to her to 'get on', as she puts it:

There was every incentive to get on. I've got loads and loads of certificates, because each time you passed a shorthand speed you had a [pay] rise. I've got twenty-two certificates in all.

Christine's pride in her own technical skills and the satisfaction she derives from the production of work of the highest possible standard is the hall-mark of her approach to teaching.



Interestingly, while working at ABC Christine had unwittingly acted as a model of hard work and industry to Dorothy. When Dorothy joined ABC as an office junior, Christine was well established there and worked in the Training and Efficiency Department. Dorothy said of this department:

Yes, I remember we we didn't like going into that department. We used to creep in there. We always thought they were very special. And you know Christine Evans, she worked in Training and Efficiency. Oh, yes, I held her in awe. I used to think 'How could she work in there?' I used to creep in there, put my things in the in-tray, look quickly at their out-tray and creep out again. I had a feeling that department was something very special and only special people worked there. That was the type of respect you had for them. They always appeared to be working very hard. It was a very quiet, industrious office and I think they gave me a model of what office work should be like.

Christine married while she was working full-time as a secretary at ABC and left four years later when she was pregnant. She and her husband, James, had jointly agreed that Christine should give up work when she became pregnant and then give priority to child-care. This involved considerable financial hardship on their part. They both wanted to have more than one child, so this meant that Christine would be out of the labour market for an extended period of time. Christine and James gave me access to their domestic decision-making process by inviting me into their house and describing the way in which they had struck a balance between family economics and the provision of adequate care for their children. Data from this interview were used in Chapter Four.

The last of the four teachers I consider here is Dorothy. She is the only part-time teacher I interviewed, but as I indicated in Chapter Four, Dorothy was a full-time teacher 'in the making'. All those who were full-time teachers during the life-span of the study had at some earlier time passed through Dorothy's preparatory phase of part-time teaching. Dorothy's current experience therefore stands as an illustration of the past experience of the full-time teachers in the study.

#### Dorothy

I got to know Dorothy just as I began my field work. She was teaching a few hours part-time, mainly in the evening, and at the same time she was following the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) course run by the college that would give her a teaching qualification. As part of this course, she was required to do a certain number of hours of teaching practice. I observed her in action in the classroom for six weeks in the autumn term of 1985 when she temporarily took over the teaching of Secretarial Duties to the 1985/6 cohort of TOPS students as part of this period of teaching practice.

The pattern of Dorothy's first phase of employment is typical of all of the teachers in the study in that they all went into office work on leaving school and gradually accumulated the technical skills necessary to work their way up the the hierarchical structures of office employment. Some, like Dorothy and Christine, did this by staying with



one large firm. Others, like Marianna and Jenny, did it by moving from job to job with different employers.

Dorothy left the local girls' grammar school with six GCE Ordinary levels, but no occupation-specific qualifications. She began as an office junior in West Port with ABC. Training in typing and shorthand was provided by the firm.

Dorothy: In the days when I started work you really became a secretary by chance rather than by actual design of the person. You started with a firm as an office junior and worked up through the firm. Then according to your personality you went on to different departments. You were offered training if you were in a large firm, rather than going to college.

EB: So you didn't do a course that would compare, say, with the General Secretarial course in the college?

Dorothy: No. I did no training like that.

EB: You went straight out of school

Dorothy: Straight out of school. I went for an interview and with my six 'O' levels I was accepted at ABC. I went into the Personnel Department. As an office junior you got to know people, they got to know you. They got to know whether you could carry things out responsibly or not and without realising it you were being assessed possibly all the time. Then you were offered training. I was offered typewriting training. I wasn't too keen on the clerical side. I decided I would like to type. I was offered that and shorthand. So we were offered this training and I accepted it.

EB: They didn't suggest you came to college?

Dorothy: No, college wasn't suggested at all. We had so many hours off work during that year and Mrs Gower taught us shorthand and we stayed behind to do typing. Mrs Evans taught us typing and I passed Stage One typing. We took our exams in the Conference Room at the works. It was all arranged, both Pitman and RSA exams, it was all arranged on the site.

EB: Presumably at that time there were courses available at the college in shorthand and typing, or were they all full-time courses?

Dorothy: No, there were evening classes, but we weren't encouraged to attend. They preferred their own set-up.

In the same way as the young girls in Griffin's (1985) study who entered office work immediately on leaving school, Dorothy had her first lessons in the technical skills of typing and shorthand provided on site by the firm for whom she was employed.

In a large firm such as that in which Dorothy was first employed, each step up the hierarchical ladder demands different technical skills. In the next extract from Dorothy's account she describes the way in which she progressed through the different kinds of office work available in a large firm. Some element of choice was available to individuals. She has already explained that she took up the offer of typing training because, as she puts it, she 'wasn't too keen on the clerical side.' She next describes how she took the opportunity to move out of the typing pool and into the Purchasing Department because she thought she would 'like a small office.' In this extract she returns to the issue of on-site training, this time commenting on its limitations compared with the broader training provided in a specialist educational institution. Dorothy continues:

I enjoyed my shorthand. I think I enjoyed doing it within the firm because they were people you knew. Also you felt your progress was definitely related to your job. Therefore you did strive for success, pretty hard. Perhaps when you go to college it's more remote. Because they've put the effort into training you...it was all people you knew were in high up positions in the firm...you wanted to impress. You didn't want to appear dim or anything like that. We made great progress. In that first year we were taking 60, 70 and 80



[words a minute] in our shorthand. But then I think...we did lack...trained people to teach us. I'm pretty sure that our progress started to slow a little with the lack of that specialised training. I remember being left to do very much of our learning on our own. I think perhaps you can only take that to a certain point. I came to a point when I decided to take evening classes at the college. I think industry started to think they would use the college rather than do the training themselves. I don't know why. I can remember doing my Stage Three in typing at the college with Mrs Cooper.

EB: Was that in an evening class?

Dorothy: Yes. I only attended evening class at college. At work I went into the typing pool and your speed picks up naturally because you're just typing all the time. That's possibly when I came to college. They [the firm] taught you enough for what they wanted you to type but if you wanted to get any further with layout of letters and that sort of thing then you needed to come into the college. So I came into the college to get that knowledge. Then I went out of the typing pool and into the Purchasing Department. That's where I became a shorthand-typist. I'd been on loan from the Pool into this department and I was selected to go into this department. You didn't just say you wanted to go; you were offered a job and you either accepted it or you said you preferred to stay in the Pool. I thought I'd like a small office. I did quite a bit of shorthand there and audio-typing, but I didn't like that very much. I didn't like the machines.

Dorothy goes on to describe her next step upwards which took her to the top of the office hierarchy for women. In her account so far there are suggestions that advancement depended on informal assessment of suitability which, as she says, was being made 'possibly all the time.' She has described how she was 'offered' training in typing and later 'offered' a move out of the typing pool. The next extract demonstrates what she meant by statement earlier in the interview that when she started work 'you really became a secretary by chance rather than by actual design of the person.' Dorothy was prompted into applying



for her promotion to secretary but was puzzled by her appointment because she was aware of a weakness in her technical skills as a typist. She had assumed that promotion depended only on technical merit.

Dorothy: So I went into the Purchasing Department. A couple of years later the secretary was leaving and I was asked if I was going to apply for the job. I hadn't really thought about that. At any rate I decided to apply and I got the job.

EB: Was that a big step up?

Dorothy: That was a big step up because I'd just been a shorthand-typist in a little office and suddenly I found myself secretary to the Chief Buyer. I had a question for him. I wanted to know why he had appointed me. I knew for a fact that I was the slowest typist in our department. I said to him 'I'm puzzled. I really want this job and I'm looking forward to working with you but I don't understand why you've appointed me'. He said I had been chosen because of my personality, because I got on well with people. I accepted the job and was very happy in it.

Dorothy then goes on to describe her work at this level. Although surprised that Mr Taylor's reason for appointing her as his secretary was based on her social as much as her technical skills, she obviously enjoyed the 'emotion management' (Hochschild, 1983) which is a taken-for-granted element of the work of a secretary at this level. She made life smooth for her boss by making his travel arrangements for him, but clearly also enjoyed 'mothering' the whole department by helping to sort out their problems and organising cohesive social events such as Christmas parties. She says:

I dealt with all the arrangements for when he [the boss] went visiting. Secretaries didn't visit much with their bosses in those days. I thoroughly enjoyed my five years of being a secretary. It was really interesting. I got on well with all the department. I organised the Christmas parties. I used to be genuinely interested in everyone. If they had problems they tended to come to me to get them sorted out.



As I described in Chapter Four, Dorothy gave up this work when she was pregnant. In common with all the teachers in the study, Dorothy has found the conditions of part-time teaching more amenable to integration with her child-care responsibilities than full-time office work, particularly at the level of private secretary.

The work history data presented in this chapter demonstrate two main points which have an impact on the current pedagogical practice of the teachers in the study. One is the pride they all share in having worked their way up from humble beginnings as office juniors. The fact that they have 'seen every stage of the game' in office work is something which they do not hide from their students. On the contrary, this past experience is frequently used in order to enhance their authority in the classroom. The other point is the emphasis placed the importance of the acquisition of technical skills. It is only Dorothy who admits to being 'puzzled' by the fact that in her promotion to private secretary her 'personality' was considered to be more important than her typing skills. The other teachers emphasise the importance of the acquisition of technical skills in their advancement.

#### PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

As teachers, they now transmit to their students the primacy of technical skills. Their classroom practice is based on the idea that the possession of technical skills is the key to 'employability'. Students readily accept this definition of 'employability'. Technical skills form the basis of the explicit knowledge that is exchanged in the classroom.

It is important though to recognise the implicit knowledge that that teachers withhold from the classroom.

## EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

As was demonstrated in Chapter Six, when teachers are asked in interview to assess the suitability of individual students for office work they readily acknowledge the importance of personal attributes and social skills. This is made clear in an interview with one of the full-time teachers in the study who I call Christine.

While Christine recognises the importance of technical skills in office work, she is also aware that employers demand a complex mix of technical skills and social skills or personal attributes.

Half of these girls that come to us now, I think their parents put them into office work because they think they can't do anything else. I don't think they realise how difficult it is to learn shorthand you know, how much all-round knowledge you need to be a secretary and it's not just that...I mean...there are many jobs you've got to be quite clever for, but you don't need a personality to go with it. You could use computers and be a whizz kid working out all those programmes and packages, but it wouldn't matter what you looked like or how you spoke. You could still do the job and get a high salary. But being a secretary, you've got to have it all the way round. If they go for interview, I know this is sexist, but more often than not they're going to be working for a man and it's pretty obvious if they're fat and slovenly that's not going to get them the job. They may be very clever, they may be able to do all the secretarial things, but they've got to.....It's a status symbol for a boss to have a secretary and I bet if you were to ask, but about 75 per cent of men, men being what they are, would prefer someone who's sort of...is a good advert for him and looks quite smart as well as having common sense and being able to greet customers politely. Some of these girls have got the wrong attitude. They think the world owes them a living. When you tell them they have to make coffee and things they find it unbelievable. So I think really good secretaries with everything are hard to find.



There is a clear recognition here that looks (including body shape) and demeanour have got to be pleasing to the 'boss', who is assumed to be a man in most cases. It is also recognised that while a secretary is regarded as a status symbol by her male boss she will also have to perform menial tasks such as making coffee. The key comment here seems to be '...you've got to have it all the way round'. While there is some sense of the injustice of this state of affairs, more particularly when compared with what is demanded in other forms of employment, there is also a sense of pride and achievement conveyed in '....really good secretaries with everything are hard to find.'

Later in the interview she said of secretarial work:

It's one of the few jobs where you need so many all-round things, where perhaps appearance counts.

I asked her to define the 'all-round things' required in a good secretary by describing their presence or absence in a particular group of students. This is what she said:

Sue is the one who had most of the assets. I think she looks the part, but perhaps some of her clothes, as were Jennifer's, were a bit too revealing which could go against her. High slits up her skirt. I think a boss wants them to be glamorous but not embarrassingly so. And perhaps low necks. I mean, perhaps I'm prudish but I would say they were probably too much that way, so I'd put that against Sue. But she was a very clean and attractive girl and her hair always looked very nice. She dressed here as she might in an office. She never came in trousers and perhaps, as I say, the low necks and slits ought to be out.

The comments here on the dress code for office workers illustrates the skill required in recognising the boundary between being attractive and even glamorous and yet not embarrassingly 'sexy'. It demands very fine

judgement indeed, particularly as such a boundary exists in the eye of the beholder.

Comments on dress were followed by comments on the attendance record of this particular group of students. They were mature students on the 1985/6 TOPS course. Several of them had school-age children.

...if you look at the register this year, there's probably only one person who hasn't been away at all. That's bad as far as I'm concerned. You can't help the sort of health you've got, but I've worked all the time through having young children and I've been absent two days in 18 years. OK, I've been lucky with health, but to me they're absent far more than I'd expect an employee to be absent. I mean if they have young children....they were told before they came on the course that if they had young children and they didn't have anyone to look after them they shouldn't start. I've been through this myself. You've got to make sure you've got firm arrangements and therefore I'd criticise them all along those lines.

However, Sue scored high on punctuality and attendance compared with her peers.

She was punctual always. That was a great asset. She attended the course for I should think at least 95 per cent of the time. With young children to look after and comparing her with the others, that was good.

Only after these comments on dress, punctuality and attendance was any comment made on this student's technical skills.

And obviously she was very good at the skills. She was a good typist and she was one of the few who passed audio-typing with distinction, so she was very good there.



Not many employers would disagree with Christine's account of the personal qualities and skills required in a good secretary. In the assessment of their students, teachers adopt the employer's perspective. During the interview in which I was probing for Christine's definition of the perfect secretary she readily named Sue as the student who had 'most of the assets'. When I asked for her definition of these assets she hesitated for some time and then said, 'Shall I be really personal and talk about her as though I was interviewing her?' It seemed as though she could more easily give me the definitions I was pressing her for if she projected herself into the role of the prospective employer.

The teachers I have interviewed can see the unfairness of many of the demands and expectations of employers and spontaneously articulate them to me in interview. One teacher spoke of the responsibility she had carried as a secretary and the great pressure she had worked under, but as she spoke it was obvious that she also took pride in her ability to cope with these burdens.

Not only did I do his personal typing but I had to supervise the typing that other typists in the department would do. You are under pressure and you carry the can. It's not just that these three letters have to go out at 5.30 but they have to be checked and they have to be correct. You sign the copy to prove you've checked it. You carry the can if that letter goes out wrong, not the boss who signs it. It's your job to check that letter. If he's got a good secretary he ought to be able to....he ought not to have to read it through. He ought to be able to sign each letter and guarantee that his secretary is good enough to make sure they're all going out without any typing errors.

She did, however, express her dissatisfaction with the low level of pay for the high level of responsibility.

And you find it's a very demanding job and very unfairly paid for what you do. As secretary I'd guarantee that I'd work harder than anybody else in his department and probably harder than the boss most of the time. He had all the trips but you did all the arranging of them. Even now you'd probably get paid at least a couple of thousand less than the people in the department you were doing all the work for.

It is notable though, that none of this dissatisfaction enters into classroom discourse. This knowledge, too, is kept out of the classroom.

When teachers describe their own work history as secretaries they emphasise the importance of technical skills in their advancement. Marianna dismisses her motivation to accumulate technical skills as 'greed'. Nevertheless, her possession of these skills gave her control over her work situation when she was threatened with work in the typing pool. Christine is proud of the fact that she possess 'twenty-two certificates'. Dorothy talks of the way in which she made 'great progress' in shorthand. The possession of these skills is something in which they take pride. As teachers, they also take pride in transmitting the same technical skills to their students. Yet it is also clear that they have a knowledge of the world of office work which they do not transmit to their students.

## CONCLUSION

Classroom life in this study is characterised first by a lack of conflict and secondly by an emphasis on the transmission of technical skills.



The lack of conflict between teachers and students stands in sharp contrast to accounts of the relationship that dominate educational literature. It is Waller's (1932) definition of the relationship that seems generally to be taken as a standard reference point:

The teacher-pupil relationship is a form of institutionalised dominance and subordination. Teacher and pupil confront each other in the school with an original conflict of desires, and however that conflict may be reduced in amount, and however much it may be hidden, it still remains (Waller 1932:195).

Waller does not argue that at some levels of the educational system or in some educational institutions, or in some classrooms the relationship might be different. The clear implication is that the teacher-learner relationship is inherently one of conflict. Waller's book deserves to be described and honoured as a 'pioneering work' (Hargreaves and Woods, 1984); it is a remarkable sociological product for its time. However, it needs to be treated with extreme caution. There is a line of research from Waller (1932) to Willis (1977) and Woods (1979) and more recent studies (Riseborough (1985) in which classroom life is described in graphic terms as a battlefield.

Battle imagery is found in abundance in this body of literature and the battle is between teachers and learners in the classroom. In Willis's study, teachers as individuals are absorbed into the anonymity of what is described as the 'educational paradigm'.

This idea concerns teaching as a fair exchange - most basically of knowledge for respect, of guidance for control. This is the dominant educational paradigm which stands outside particular teachers but enables them to exert control legitimately upon the children (Willis, 1977).

Willis also claims that:

....teachers know quite well that teaching is essentially a relationship between potential contenders for supremacy. It makes sense to speak of, and it does feel like, 'winning and losing' (Willis, 1977).

He goes on to describe the state of 'permanent guerilla war' in which the 'lads' give no quarter to a 'weak opponent'.

In sharp contrast to these descriptions of the teacher-learner relationship, teachers and students in this setting have arrived at a mutually agreed definition of the knowledge content of the classroom encounter.

In order to explain classroom behaviour I have found useful the interactionist concept of 'collective reciprocity' proposed by King and Ripton in their study of students and teachers in Canadian secondary schools (King and Ripton, 1970). Tyler comments on this concept, describing it in terms of a 'truce' or an 'implicit deal' between students and teachers (Tyler 1988:127). From the findings in their study King and Ripton argue that:

'...classroom behaviour can effectively be explained on the basis of the primary motivations of career for teachers and what is equivalent to career for students' (King and Ripton 1970:40).

In the secretarial section students are eagerly looking for qualifications in the skill subjects that have labour market currency. They are willing to subdue criticisms of some elements of their curriculum package so long as they have confidence in the ability of



their teachers to give them adequate preparation for examinations in those subjects which they value. This high level of instrumentalism is matched by teachers who place great emphasis on the acquisition of technical skills measured by success in appropriate examinations. Thus they are defined as good teachers. In the terms defined by King and Ripton, student and teacher career needs converge in their joint emphasis on the teaching and learning of technical skills.

## CHAPTER NINE

## CONCLUSION



The study has explored uncharted educational terrain. The educational experience of female students in colleges of further education has not attracted very much attention from educational researchers. It is probably futile to speculate about why this might be so. What is more important is to demonstrate the significance of the findings of this study. This concluding chapter therefore begins by drawing together and summarising the findings. This summary is followed by an exploration of the significance of the findings.

#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

It is clear that female students are not denied access to further education colleges. Aggregate statistics reveal the somewhat surprising phenomenon that female students outnumber male students in NAFE. This is true both of NAFE nationally and of Riverbank College. The issue is not one of access to institutions but of access to courses, particularly vocational courses, where very sharp and often exclusive gender divisions are evident in student enrolment patterns.

Within the last two decades there has been much criticism of the way in which vocational courses in colleges of further education serve to reproduce the gender divisions of the labour market. Such criticisms, however valid and valuable, do not yield explanations of why and how it is that such reproduction occurs. It is widely documented that feminised segments of the labour market are characterised by low pay, low prestige

and lack of promotion prospects. Why, then, do so many female students enrol on vocational courses that can only qualify them for entry into feminised segments of the labour market? This question was the original impulse for the study.

Once the research problem had been identified, a decision had to be made about the best way to solve it. Through the daily classroom behaviour of students and teachers in the study, the sexual divisions of the labour market are undeniably reproduced. Qualitative research methods were therefore chosen since it was felt important to develop an appreciative understanding of the cultural world of students and teachers. The findings vindicate this choice of research methods.

The study began with periods of observation in the classroom. A distinctive pattern of classroom behaviour soon emerged. It was strikingly different from the conflict-laden descriptions of classroom life which have dominated so many sociological studies of schools from Waller (1932) to Willis (1977) and Woods (1979). The general picture of classroom life in this setting was one of teachers and students working together harmoniously towards the same clearly defined goals. They held a common view of the outcomes teaching and learning. Teachers concentrated classroom activity on preparing students for external examinations. Students rarely behaved in a way that could be described as presenting any overt challenge to the ways in which teachers managed classroom procedures and practices. It seemed almost as though there was nothing to be explained about the classroom life that I observed.



Student behaviour here could easily have been described as unreflexive passivity dismissed as being of no analytical interest.

It is only too easy to make the assumption that situations in which teachers experience no obvious control problems and in which students outwardly conform, at least to the behavioural elements of teacher expectations, do not merit close investigation. The starting point for most ethnographic research both in schools and other settings is the deceptively simple question: What is going on here? The findings in this study indicate that this question could fruitfully be asked of hitherto neglected educational settings characterised by classroom calm and student conformity.

Data collected in interviews and from written responses to questionnaires gave the study a richness and breadth of span that had not been anticipated at the outset.

First, the richness. An analysis of interview and questionnaire data made it abundantly clear that neither students nor their teachers could be regarded as passive or acquiescent. On the contrary, both groups were active, reflective agents. Classroom behaviour was based on their attempts to make sense of the world as they found it and to adjust their perceived needs to the structure of available opportunities. Although this behaviour serves to reproduce the sexual divisions of the labour market it can by no means be dismissed as passivity.

Secondly, the breadth. The further I went into the study, the wider became its range of reference. In order to understand the observed classroom encounter between students and teachers the analysis had to move beyond the confines of the classroom, first to the institutional level and then to the even wider social structures of the sexual division of labour.

The original research design did not include mature students. The intention had been to concentrate on 16+ full-time students on General Secretarial courses. Important differences between the motivation of the two age groups soon emerged from an analysis of interview and questionnaire data. The mature students are described as being at a revolutionary stage in their lives. They see the employment opportunities made available by successful completion of the course as a means of making a radical change in their lives. In training for office work they are guaranteed employment in the local labour market. Many of these students experience the stress and harrowing self-doubts common to mature students at any level of the educational system (McLaren, 1985). But they also derive an intense sense of self-esteem from their struggles and eventual examination successes. The TOPS students are highly committed to office work. In contrast, very few of the 16+ General Secretarial students are particularly committed to office work. They are described as being in a state of evolution. Many of them readily admit that they arrived on the course almost by default, having failed to achieve the entry requirements demanded for entry onto other, preferred, courses. However, they are committed to the course in that



they recognise the general usefulness of qualifications that will gain them easy access to the labour market.

For both groups of students, then, vocational qualifications are regarded as important acquisitions. As they were for the black girls in Fuller's (1983) study, qualifications are 'critical' for future hopes of employment. The girls in Fuller's study were well aware of sexual and racial discrimination in the labour market. It was therefore their 'current thinking about the future' (Fuller, 1983:128) that led them to subdue such criticisms as they had about their school experience and work towards qualifications that might give them some control over the future. Similarly, both groups of students in my study had criticisms of some of the elements of the curriculum they were following but their 'current thinking about the future' led them to withhold their criticisms.

Both TOPS and General Secretarial students could therefore be regarded as perceptive analysts of the labour market and the opportunities it offers for women. Although the majority of General Secretarial students are not so firmly committed to office work as are TOPS students, they are nevertheless seeking qualifications that 'might come in useful' should other employment aspirations elude them. Both groups of students are sufficiently astute to realise that their surest hope of gaining employment is within a feminised segment of the labour market. The extreme example of Jo used in Chapter Seven illustrates the fact that students will adhere to the general goals of their course even

though they might reject the value of one particular element of the whole curriculum. Long term aspirations for both groups therefore enable them to over-ride present dissatisfactions with some of the elements of their curriculum package.

The classroom behaviour of the teachers in the study also serves to reproduce the sexual divisions of the labour market. They have been office workers themselves and make constant reference to this past experience as part of their current pedagogical practice. However, office routines and practices are not questioned but are constantly affirmed by such references to them. Teachers concentrate their classroom activities on transmitting the technical skills that will qualify students for office work. Superficially, they would seem to be bound up in a conservative cycle of reproducing the next generation of uncritical office workers.

The analysis of interview data gathered from teachers made it impossible to regard their behaviour simply as passive complicity in the cycle of reproduction. These women are teachers in a college of further education. The close relationship between the labour market and colleges of further education makes classrooms in them very different learning environments from those in primary and secondary schools. The sharp realities of the labour market are reflected not only in the institutional structures of colleges but also in the much deeper levels of common-sense understandings of appropriate pedagogical goals and practices. Just as Gaskell found in her study of secretarial programmes



in two community colleges in Canada, the dominant ideology here is that of 'employability' (Gaskell,1986:15). Skill as a teacher in the secretarial section of Riverbank College is measured by the examination achievements of students and also by students' subsequent success in finding employment in the local labour market.

All teachers in the study know the world of office work from their earlier experience of it. They are proud of this practical experience; one emphatically proclaimed it to be superior to knowledge gained 'just from books'. Yet they are selective in exactly what elements of this experience are transposed into classroom knowledge. They concentrate on the transmission of technical skills and subdue other forms of knowledge. The importance of social skills in the office are placed at one remove from the classroom encounter when they emerge in written comments on student reports and in references requested by potential employers. They are further removed from the classroom when they emerge in interview in teacher typologies of individual students and their suitability for office work. Teachers also know from their experience of the world of office work that its economic and status rewards are unequally distributed. They know that sexist attitudes and prejudices pervade its terms and conditions of employment. They are critical of these aspects of office work but selectively withhold their criticisms from the classroom.

## EXPLANATIONS

At the theoretical level, the study sprang from a sense of the inadequacy of the capacity of deterministic, macro-sociological theory to explain human behaviour. At the same time I was aware of the of criticisms of micro-sociological theory which allegedly under-estimates or even ignores structural constraints external to the individual. Nevertheless, I decided to begin at the micro-sociological level of classroom interaction and employ qualitative research methods. This was done for two closely associated reasons. The first was that I was exploring unknown educational terrain. The second was that I shared feminist criticism of much mainstream social theory in that it is based on the experience of men. In beginning at the micro-sociological level, I hoped to be able to create an explanatory theoretical model capable of attending to both creativity and constraint in human behaviour and also capable of incorporating the experience of women.

As Davies argues:

One must...find a way graphically to describe the relationship between constraint and independence, between social structure and localized choice (Davies, 1984:238).

She goes on to state that her own explanatory version of the classroom behaviour she observed was 'script analysis' but adds '...each piece of research should generate its own synthesis'.

As the study developed and extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom, I found Pollard's model of classroom coping strategies useful as a starting point in explaining the immediately observed behaviour



(Pollard, 1982). This model does not exactly create a 'synthesis' but acts as a broad, cohesive framework in which human behaviour can be placed. Pollard's model begins at the level of classroom interaction but incorporates both the contextual structures of the institution within which classrooms are located and also even wider social structures. What Pollard calls 'biography' enables links to be made between these three contextual layers.

At the level of classroom interaction I found the concept of 'collective reciprocity' proposed by King and Ripton (1970) useful in explaining classroom behaviour and its underlying motivation in this setting. Students have an instrumental approach to learning. Short-term criticisms of some elements of their curriculum package are muted since their long-term goal is to gain credentials which will give them some control over their future. Their criticisms are not converted into overt resistance in the classroom. Teachers' goals on the other hand are short-term. They concentrate on transmitting the technical skills required of office workers. Their earlier experience as office workers has given them a fuller knowledge of the world of office work, but this is kept out of the classroom. King and Ripton's concept of 'collective reciprocity' explains this behaviour. They argue that:

The cornerstone of this reciprocity is the near congruency of teachers' career needs and students' conception of education as an instrumental process (King and Ripton, 1970:40)

This 'reciprocity' of interest emphasises the joint nature of teacher and student interaction. As I explained in an earlier chapter, I was

concerned that the analysis should not treat student and teacher behaviour as though they somehow had a separate existence.

The next contextual layer in Pollard's model is that of the institution. The findings here indicate how important it is to locate classroom behaviour within its institutional framework. Classrooms in colleges of further education are not the same as those in primary and secondary schools. The ideology permeating the classrooms in this study is that of 'employability'. Teaching and learning are directed towards that end.

The outer contextual layer of the model takes us to the level of social structures. Pollard argues for the importance of biography in understanding behaviour. He says:

...the consideration of biography must itself draw on an awareness of structural factors (Pollard, 1982:29).

The huge gap in his consideration of 'structure factors' is that he makes no mention of the fact that the structural location of women is different from that of men. The biographical data presented in the study indicate how important it is to take into account the sexual division of labour in explaining educational and occupational choices made by women. Socialist feminist theory fills this gap in that it enables us to understand that most women have dual demands on their labour power. They have to make decisions at different stages in the life cycle about how best to deploy that labour power. As we have seen from interview data gathered from teachers and mature students, most women withdraw from



paid labour while their children are small and then return as child-care responsibilities diminish. Women's involvement in the labour market is framed not by the structures of capitalism alone nor by the structures of patriarchy alone, but by the structures of capitalist patriarchy identified by socialist feminist theory.

### IMPLICATIONS

The findings summarised here are based on an analysis of data collected in a single educational setting. What are the implications of the study beyond its immediate setting? This is the problem that faces any small scale, qualitative study. I would argue that the findings here have important implications both for educational research and policy which is aimed at breaking down gender divisions in education.

One of the arguments that permeates the study is that educational researchers have been extremely selective in their identification of problems to be solved. The result is that many substantive areas of educational experience have been neglected. One such area is that of female students in NAFE. A question that this study prompts is: How are educational problems raised and defined?

In her review of two decades of research in the sociology of education, Acker (1981) highlighted the general neglect of the educational experience of girls and women. This neglect is not simply a feminist issue. It resonates with a much wider concern about educational research which was raised two decades ago by Young when he recalled

Seeley's distinction between the 'making' and 'taking' of research problems (Seeley, 1966, quoted in Young, 1971:1).

In the setting described in this study there would not seem to be a research problem worthy of exploration. There is no difficulty in recruiting students onto office skills courses, both full-time and part-time. Course provision meets the needs both of potential students and employers; students who successfully complete office skills courses have no difficulty in finding employment locally. Classrooms are characterised by order. Teachers experience no discipline problems. Students are highly motivated. What then is the problem?

The problem only became apparent when classroom behaviour and institutional structures were set against the wider framework of the gender divisions of the labour market. The central research question then became: Why do female students make such an apparently irrational course choice? The majority of feminist research has concentrated on attracting female students into high status 'masculinised' courses and curricular areas. In contrast very little attention has been devoted to students such as those in this study who remain within 'feminised' curricular areas and seek employment in feminised segments of the labour market.

Major equal opportunities policy recommendations to date are based on liberal feminist theory. Within this theoretical framework the burden for change rests with individuals. Existing social structures are not



challenged. It is individual girls and women who must be encouraged and supported in the quest for qualifications and skills that will enable them to compete with men for jobs that are currently regarded as being of high status and thus well-paid. This liberal, meritocratic reformism is familiar from much earlier attempts to draw talented working class children onto the 'ladder' of occupational opportunity and thus incorporate them into existing structures. Equal opportunities initiatives in education harmonise very readily with the current 'new vocationalism'. The declared aim of both is to seek out as-yet-untapped pools of talent so as to enable individuals to climb to the highest possible levels in existing occupational structures.

Educational arguments such as these seem unassailable, but they ignore the existing conditions of the labour market with its hierarchical and sexual divisions. The application of socialist feminist theory rather more uncomfortably extends the problem beyond that of an individual or a classroom problem. Socialist feminist theory brings us face to face with a demand for wide-ranging social change both in the work-place and in the home. Socialist feminists have consistently argued for many years that gender inequalities in education are not simply an educational problem (Arnot, 1981; Wolpe, 1978).

## CONCLUSION

Educational research has come a long way since the experience of female students was ignored and theory was built on all-male student samples. However, as Arnot argues:

...explaining how and why girls and women are educated as they are is not a simple task; it reveals the complexity of the educational system, the intricacies of its internal structures and processes and the importance of its relations with external structures such as those of the wage labour process and the family (Arnot, 1986:132).

There is still much work to be done. The findings in this study clearly demonstrate that any explanation of 'how and why girls and women are educated as they are' must begin with the empirical investigation of their experience at the micro-sociological level. It must also recognise that the responses of female students to schooling are framed by the complex macro-sociological structures of patriarchal capitalism. Weiner puts the argument strongly:

...unless we acknowledge that sexual inequalities in schooling are directly related to the subordination of women to men in other areas of social and economic life and create strategies for change on that basis, we shall be unable to develop adequate means of subversion (and perhaps revolution) to produce genuine and enduring change (Weiner, 1986:273).



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NAME.....

## Section A

### QUALIFICATIONS

On the next three pages (2 to 4) I'd like you to give me as much information as you can remember about your qualifications.

On page 2 I'd like you to give details of exams taken BEFORE you began your course in September 1985.

On page 3 I'd like you to give details of exams taken AS PART OF THE COURSE you began in September 1985.

On page 4 I'd like you to give details of exams taken AFTER you completed the course you began in September 1985.

Try to give FOUR pieces of information about each exam:

- date of exam (month and year)
- exam board (CSE or GCE will do for CSE and GCE exams)
- subject
- level/grade/speed/stage

For example:

- |         |      |     |             |           |
|---------|------|-----|-------------|-----------|
| - May   | 1985 | CSE | French      | Grade 3   |
| - April | 1985 | RSA | Typewriting | Stage One |



## Part One

Please give details of exams taken BEFORE you began your course in September 1985.

Try to give FOUR pieces of information about each exam:

- date of exam (month and year)
- exam board (CSE or GCE will do for CSE and GCE exams)
- subject
- level/grade/speed/stage

## Part Two

Please give details of exams taken AS PART OF THE COURSE you began in September 1985.

Try to give FOUR pieces of information about each exam:

- date of exam (month and year)
- exam board (CSE or GCE will do for CSE and GCE exams)
- subject
- level/grade/speed/stage



### Part Three

Please give details of exams taken AFTER you completed the course you began in September 1985.

Try to give FOUR pieces of information about each exam:

- date of exam (month and year)
- exam board (CSE or GCE will do for CSE and GCE exams)
- subject
- level/grade/speed/stage

## Section B

### EMPLOYMENT

If you've not been employed in office work or not employed at all since completing your course, please move on to Section C. (page 9)

If you have been employed in office work since completing your course, I'd like you to give me as much information as you feel you can (and want to) about any job(s) you've had since leaving College.

If you have any comments on your job(s) that my questions haven't allowed for, please add them. I'd be grateful for as much information about your employment experience as you want to give me.

I've allowed space on the next three pages (6 to 8) for information about three jobs. If you've had more than three jobs, please add a sheet of paper for each additional job but try to give the same sort of details that I've asked for on pages 6 to 8.



## Part One

Please give details of the job you first obtained after completing your course at College.

1. employer's/firm's name
2. address
3. dates of employment: from to
4. which of the following skills did/do you use regularly?  
please tick:
  - typing
  - audio-typing
  - shorthand
  - switchboard
  - receptionist
  - book-keeping/accounts
  - opening mail
  - filing
  - word-processing
  - photo-copying
  - any others - please specify:
4. how many hours a week did/do you work?
5. what was/is your weekly pay before deductions?
6. did/do you feel you had/have any chance of promotion?

## Part Two

Please give details of the second job you obtained after completing your course at College.

1. employer's/firm's name

2. address

3. dates of employment: from to

4. which of the following skills did/do you use regularly?  
please tick:

typing  
audio-typing  
shorthand  
switchboard  
receptionist  
book-keeping/accounts  
opening mail  
filing  
word-processing  
photo-copying  
any others - please specify:

4. how many hours a week did/do you work?

5. what was/is your weekly pay before deductions?

6. did/do you feel you had/have any chance of promotion?



### Part Three

Please give details of the third job you obtained after completing your course at College.

1. employer's/firm's name

2. address

3. dates of employment: from to

4. which of the following skills did/do you use regularly?  
please tick:

typing  
audio-typing  
shorthand  
switchboard  
receptionist  
book-keeping/accounts  
opening mail  
filing  
word-processing  
photo-copying  
any others - please specify:

4. how many hours a week did/do you work?

5. what was/is your weekly pay before deductions?

6. did/do you feel you had/have any chance of promotion?

After completing this section please move on to Section D on page 10

## Section C

Some of you perhaps did not go into office work but chose employment in other areas. Some of you are perhaps still trying to find office work or any kind of work. Some of you perhaps decided to take another course of some kind.

Whatever has happened to you since you completed your course in College, I would be interested to hear from you about your experiences since then. My research is about secretarial training but it's also about what students do after their training. Those of you who aren't working away in offices are just as important to my research as those of you who are!

I'd be very grateful for as much information as you feel you can give me. Add extra sheets of paper if you feel you want to!

After completing this section please move on to Section D on page 10



## Section D

### Reflections on the course

It would be very helpful to me if you could make any comments here about the course that you followed. I'm particularly interested in whether or not you have found the skills that you learned useful in the job(s) you have had since leaving College.

In the light of your experience, are there some subjects that you think could be excluded from the course? Should some subjects have been given more time in the course? Should some subjects have been given less time?

Again, add extra sheets if you feel you want to make lengthy comments!

Thanks very much for persevering so far; I really am very grateful.

